4
Gakuto Mikumo
ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako
STRIKE THE BLOOD
LABYRINTH OF THE BLUE WITCH

4 STRIKE THE BLOOD

Labyrinth of the Blue Witch

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako

Yuuma Tokoyogi
Daughter of the Witch
The Fourth Primogenitor's
old friend who bewitches the city
Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer
Kanon Kanase
Faux-Angel
The kindhearted
Saint of Middle School
Nagisa Akatsuki
Sister of the Primogenitor
Innocent, outspoken, and wise

La Folia Rihavein
Princess of Aldegia
Clever, wise, silver-haired crown princess
Sayaka Kirasaka
Shamanic War Dancer
Elegant dancer and marksman

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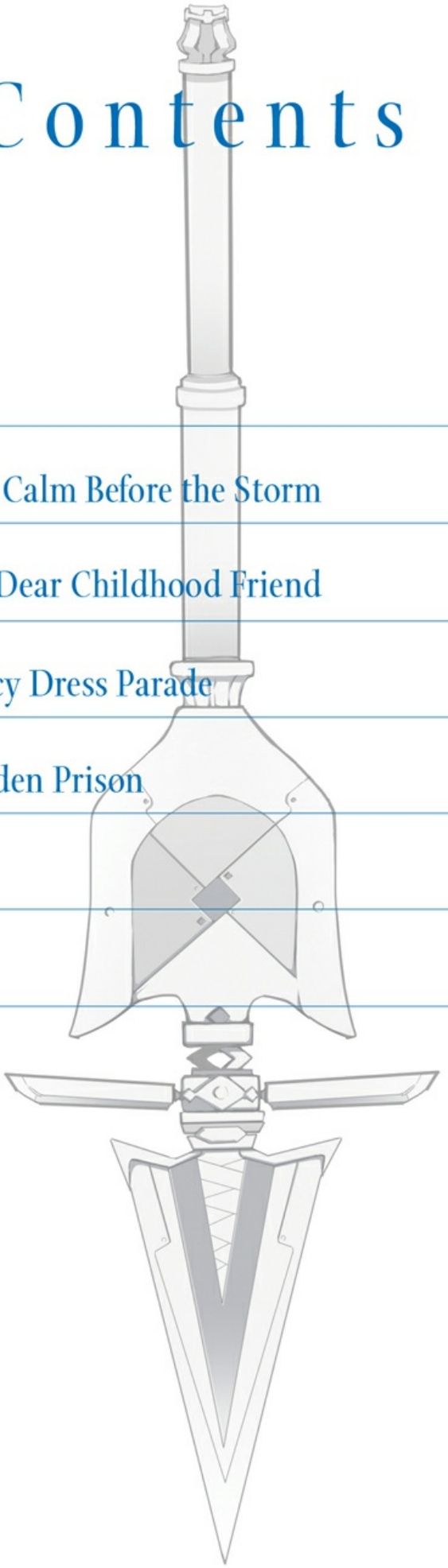


Design / Hirokazu Watanabe (2725, Inc.)

STRIKE THE BLOOD

LABYRINTH OF THE BLUE WITCH

4

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Intro

INTRO

Before her eyes was the midsummer sea.

The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City was a man-made island. Summer never ended in this city built in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. White cumulonimbus clouds floated across the vivid, ultramarine-colored sky; the bright rays of the sun shone from the surface of the calm, mirrorlike sea.

She was a Japanese girl in her teens, tall and lithe, with her hair in a long ponytail. Her skin was pale; her hair was a light brown. Her beauty had a glamorous elegance to it, but somehow, the look on her face was a melancholic one. She sullenly pressed her lips together, letting slip a tired sigh from time to time.

An airplane in the process of landing passed through the corner of her vision.

They were in an executive suite at the airport.

It was a so-called VIP room, reserved exclusively for guests of state and high-ranking government officials. The floor was covered with a rectangular shag carpet, and an enormous television was embedded in a wall of beautifully grained wood.

Two foreign guests were looking up at it while chatting pleasantly.

The first was a handsome, blond, blue-eyed man. His name was Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal.

Based on appearance, he looked no older than twenty-five, but he was actually a noble of the Warlord's Empire in Europe. In other words, he was a pureblood vampire, a direct descendant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.

Sitting opposite the youthful-looking aristocrat was a young woman.

Her silver hair was evocative of a snowy plain; her blue eyes sparkled like a pale glacier. She was a girl so lovely that she was called the Second Coming of Freya.

This was the crown princess of the Aldegian royal family, La Folia Rihavein.

“In this scene, she’s become completely defenseless before the enemy, despite the combat situation. I applaud the tactical merits of changing one’s gear, but there are practical difficulties involved.” Princess La Folia calmly conveyed her opinion as she watched what was on the television screen.

She was of the royal family of a nation with a long history of advanced sorcerous technology. Furthermore, she was a high-ranking priestess able to employ spirit-summoning spells. She did not show a single shred of fear at conversing with the vampire aristocrat seated so close by.

For his part, Vattler had a look of uncharacteristic seriousness on him as he watched the screen. “I wonder about that. In this instance, perhaps transformation should be viewed not as a mere change of equipment, but as altering one’s physical properties as well? In that case, defensive capability is maintained even if the change is not fully realized.”

“So you are saying the girls’ clothes are not disappearing, but rather, being rearranged on an atomic level and entering an energized form?” The princess nodded as if quite captivated. The girls she was watching on the screen were just changing into their battle forms to fight with a giant monster.

“Although that does mean they use up their ritual power at a greatly increased rate,” said Vattler with a note of sarcasm.

La Folia smiled as she shook her head. “By aligning with an element, it is possible to suppress one’s consumption of ritual power. But when considering the precision required for physical transmutation, it must be difficult for the individual caster to remain in a transformed state.”

“Ahh, so that is why they require the use of supplemental items…”

Sayaka Kirasaka grimaced as she watched their serious faces as they debated. *Why do I have to be here?* she asked herself with an anguished expression.

Sayaka was an Attack Mage—more specifically, a Shamanic War Dancer—from the Lion King Agency. She was an expert in curses and assassination.

Because of their area of expertise, Sayaka and her cohorts were often assigned to protecting VIPs who were at a high risk of being targets for curses and

assassination attempts. The logic was simple: Use an assassin to kill an assassin.

Sayaka's current mission was to escort and protect La Folia Rihavein.

La Folia Rihavein was a beautiful princess whose name was known around the world. Even if not on official state business, she was *very* important to the Japanese government during her stay. That went double when she had an Old Guard vampire, Dimitrie Vattler, sitting with her; it put a heavy responsibility on the person protecting her. Dispatching Sayaka, the proud user of Der Freischötz, one of the Lion King Agency's highest-ranked divine arms, was, if anything, an obvious choice.

Nonetheless, Sayaka's expression was morose.

La Folia and Vattler were watching, in complete and utter seriousness, a magical-girl show meant for children on an all-anime TV channel. They were having a very serious tactical discussion while watching girls in fluttering, miniskirted outfits doing battle with evildoers. It was nice that things were so peaceful, but she felt deeply ridiculous for monitoring them as they did so, progressively turning Sayaka's mood more and more glum.

Incidentally, the knights escorting the princess standing in one corner of the executive suite and Vattler's young vampire subordinates in another were all watching the show with rapt attention.

Some of them were clenching their fists as they cheered the heroines on; others were moved nearly to the point of tears. It was a little unsettling how much of an effect it was having on a bunch you'd think would look at children's anime as vulgar rubbish, which only added to Sayaka's anguish.

After he waited for the ending theme to finish, Vattler suddenly changed the subject. "Incidentally, princess, I have heard a strange rumor of late." He spoke in a tone of casual indifference, but that instant, the atmosphere in the suite grew tense. "It was to the effect that…a unit of Aldegian knights was being dispatched to Itogami Island in secret."

"Oh my," murmured the princess, tilting her head with a smiling look on her face. "Is that such a strange rumor, I wonder? My aunt is here on this island. Even if she has lost her right of succession, she is still very much a member of the Aldegian royal house. Surely it is the least we can do."

“And so, they come to a remote island like this to protect a middle school student? The elite Knights of the Second Coming have it rough.”

The young-looking aristocrat’s taunting words did not cause La Folia’s smile to falter. “Well, she is a rather high-maintenance aunt.”

The knights escorting the princess held their breath as they silently watched the two engage in conversation.

Even if it looked like a casual, peaceful discussion, what was unfolding between Vattler and the princess was actually a high-stakes backroom negotiation between foreign powers.

A girl named Kanon Kanase, daughter of the previous, now-retired king of Aldegia, lived on Itogami Island. Citing this, La Folia had dispatched Aldegian knights to Itogami Island without public notice. Knights of the kingdom protecting the royal family: There was nothing unnatural about this.

However, *the World’s Mightiest Vampire*, who attended the very same school Kanon did, was another matter entirely.

In other words, in the name of protecting Kanon Kanase, the Aldegian royal family could keep eyes on Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, with no real burden whatsoever. Since Vattler was staying at Itogami Island for the very same purpose, he surely was not amused. That was why he was saying, in a roundabout way, *Don’t meddle in my business*. Even so, La Folia narrowed her eyes as she calmly gazed right back at Vattler.

“Now that you mention it, I have heard there are some rather violent sorts from the Warlord’s Empire coming here as well. Count Wortizlawa and Lord Zagan, both well-known militants from the Dominion, I believe?” Vattler replied with an innocent look on his face. “They are simple tourists. There’s a large festival taking place on Itogami Island soon, after all.”

The princess raised her eyebrows, seemingly thrown off for the first time.

“A festival?”

Sayaka bit her lip as she saw La Folia’s eyes begin to sparkle. *This is bad*, she thought. She suddenly saw a grave expression come over the face of the knight commander of the princess’s escorts, too.

Sayaka quickly forced herself into the conversation with Vattler, whispering into La Folia's ear. "I-it's just about time, princess. We must make preparations for your fli…" Seeing Sayaka in such a hurry seemed to bring a look of even greater pleasure over the princess.

La Folia had been scheduled to return to her home nation of Aldegia on a charter flight arranged by the Japanese government. If she was sent on her way, Sayaka's mission would have ended without incident. She couldn't abide carefully laid plans going awry because of a carelessly tossed-out piece of information.

Princess La Folia had many virtues: She was wise and possessed great knowledge, and she was sly as well as bold. However, the other side of that coin was that she was intensely driven to feed her voracious curiosity.

Letting her know there was a festival afoot threatened to make her say, *I'll delay my return by a day and enjoy the sights*. That had to be avoided at all costs. "Well then, princess. Have a pleasant journey. My regards to your father."

Mercifully, Vattler didn't seem to have any intention of stopping La Folia from leaving. Officially, he was there to see the princess off to begin with, but his real objective was thwarting the Aldegians.

If La Folia was to politely return to her home nation, that would save both of them a lot of trouble.

As if urging the dithering princess to get moving, Sayaka led her out of the suite. She could see that the charter plane was at the airport, on standby, and ready for takeoff. All she had to do was haul the princess aboard.

"What is this festival, Sayaka?" La Folia elegantly walked down an exclusive corridor as she posed the question.

"The Hollow Eve Festival. It's a festival they hold in Itogami City at this time every year. There are a number of events all over the island and…b-by events, I mean floats and stalls and other entertainment for the masses, not something a princess need concern herself about at all!"

"My…" Hearing Sayaka's explanation, La Folia's eyes glittered like those of a little girl.

“Geh,” went the knight commander, his face twitching. “Y-you mustn’t, Your Highness! It was only days ago that someone was after your life. His Royal Highness is set upon your returning to the homeland. If you delay your return any further…!”

“Ah, it seems students are holding exhibits and refreshment booths as well.”

Ignoring her subordinate’s admonitions, the princess had begun to check the public events website on a smartphone she’d pulled out from somewhere.

The knight commander clutched his head and lifted his face to the sky. “Your *Highneeess*!”

“Princess, um, our prime minister specially arranged this airplane so, ah…”

“You do not need to say it. I am well aware I cannot cause your nation difficulties for the sake of attending a festival out of mere personal interest.” La Folia tapered her lips a little and exhaled in apparent dismay. Sayaka continued leading her by the hand as they passed through a doorway leading to the boarding gate. That instant, they were both struck by light, momentary dizziness. The scenery shimmered like a mirage before they emerged under the dazzling sun.

“…However, if we cannot reach the airplane, it cannot be helped, can it?” The princess switched to a mischievous tone of voice, clearly finding the present circumstance amusing.

“What do you mean, can’t reach the…er…huh?!”

Sayaka looked around the area in horror. There was no question they’d been in the airport until a few moments prior. However, what was now spread out before their eyes were the vast sea and an under-construction structure floating upon it.

In spite of the many signs of fresh destruction, Sayaka recognized the sight all too well.

Itogami Island, Sub-float No. 13—

In the past, it was the place Sayaka, with Kojou Akatsuki alongside her, had engaged in a deadly duel with terrorists. There was no mistaking it for anything

else.

However, this was essentially the opposite side of the island from Itogami Island's central airport. It had to be almost ten kilometers as the crow flies. It simply wasn't the kind of distance you could travel in an instant.

And yet, the fact was that Sayaka and the princess, and only them, had been tossed onto the tip of the sub-float.

There was no sign of the knights that had accompanied them; nor was the aircraft the princess was scheduled to board or the airport and its buildings visible anywhere. They'd been whisked off to this place the moment they'd passed through the interior airport doorway. It was as if they'd walked into a rip in space itself.

Of course, it wasn't a mere natural phenomenon. The chance it was a magical attack by someone was quite high. But Sayaka didn't feel any attack coming on. Psychics of her and La Folia's level ought to have felt some premonition from such a large-scale spell before it went off…but they had not.

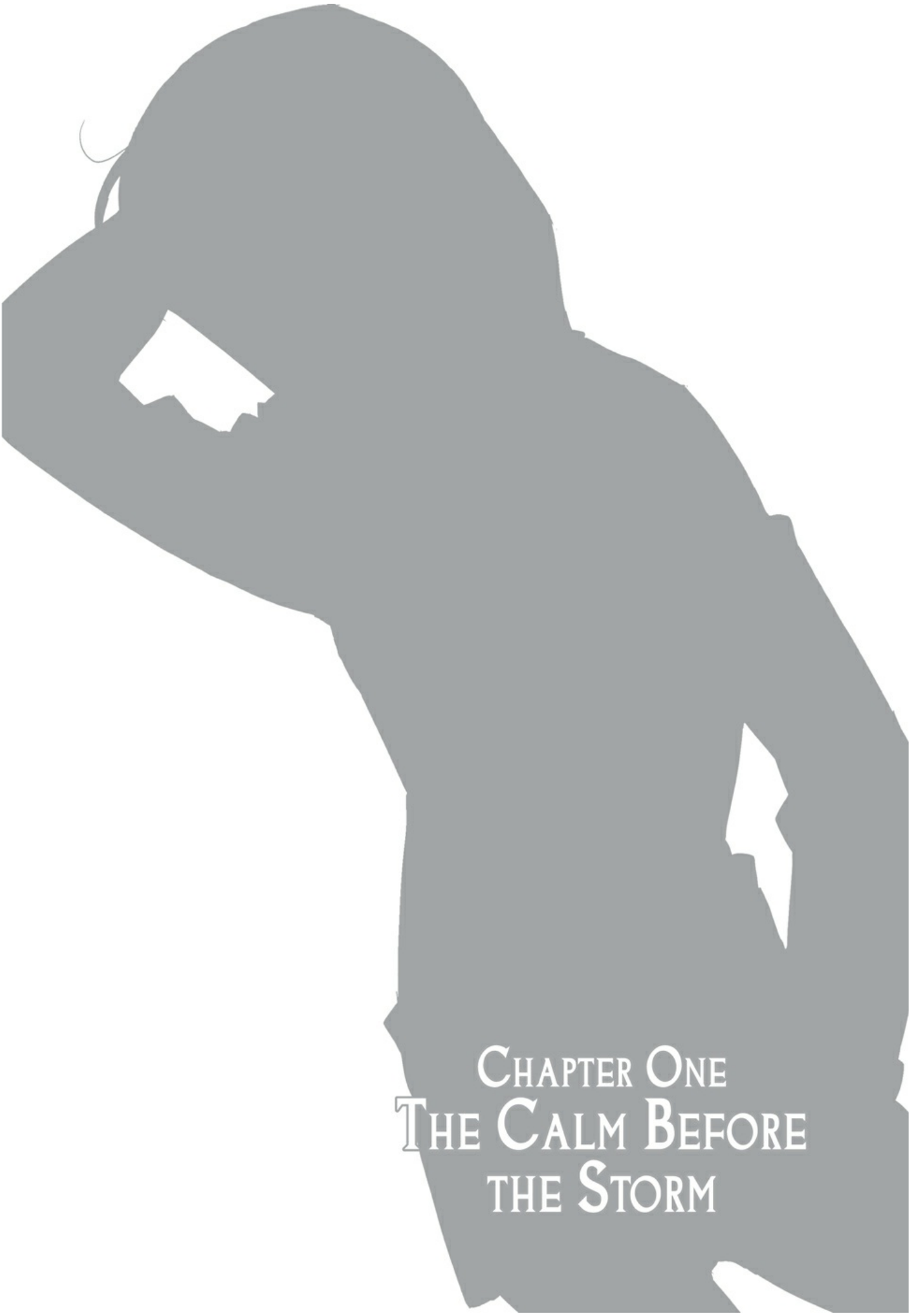
"There's the Demon Sanctuary for you. We certainly won't be bored for a while," La Folia said as an innocent, charming smile came over her face. She had her beloved spell gun out as she surveyed the entire area, but it did not seem that this anomaly was targeted at the princess specifically. In spite of that, there was no mistaking that she found the situation quite amusing.

Sayaka felt a sense of fierce unease as she looked up at the sky.

The tranquil, blue, eternal summer sky seemed like the calm before the storm.

It was the final week of October—

The people of the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City, all astir at the impending start of the festival, had yet to notice a thing.



Chapter One
The Calm Before the Storm

CHAPTER ONE

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

1

The air was stiflingly hot and stagnant.

The surface of the Pacific Ocean loomed large outside the window of the Itogami City municipal monorail train car; there was nothing to obstruct the rays of the sun as the cab ran across an elevated track alongside the seaside cliffs. The brutal rays of the sun felt more appropriate to the height of summer as they mercilessly roasted the passengers inside the car.

Kojou Akatsuki looked like he was pressing his face into the aluminum door as he groaned weakly. “Aw, crap…so hot…”

He was a teenage boy with a languid expression wearing a parka over his high school uniform.

He bore the ridiculous title of the World’s Mightiest Vampire, but even the lofty abilities of the Fourth Primogenitor were of little aid in this instance. With the train car full with passengers, he couldn’t even move; all he could do was let out an anguished voice as the dazzling rays of the sun poured in from the window.

The cab gently rocked as the monorail hit a curve, with centrifugal force sending the passengers tilting. The girl next to him suppressed a yelp as his silent pressure pressed down upon her.

“Yeek…?!”

This was Yukina Himeragi, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

She had unadorned black hair and big black eyes. There was a bit of a childish

look about her, but the girl had a lovely face. Her body was slender but without giving any impression of fragility. She had the symmetry, functional beauty, and resilience of a sword forged by a master.

Officially, Yukina was Kojou's junior, attending middle school at the same school—Saikai Academy—he attended, but her actual mission was to watch over the Fourth Primogenitor. Yukina had been granted the authority to eliminate Kojou if she judged independently that circumstances warranted it.

As proof of this, the bass guitar case she always carried with her contained a weapon built with cutting-edge sorcerous technology. It was a demon-purging Schneewaltzer spear for anti-demonic combat, able to neutralize any magical energy and said to be able to destroy even a vampire primogenitor.

However, even the finest of divine arms was nothing but dead weight inside a monorail during rush hour.

Tossing the Lion King Agency's prized secret weapon onto the roof rack to keep it from bothering other passengers, Yukina was pressed against Kojou, her surveillance target, tighter than she had ever been before.

Surrounded on all sides by a door, the back of a seat, and the passengers packed like sardines, their entire bodies were pressed firmly against each other's.

Kojou whispered in low voice as he sensed the refreshing scent of Yukina's hair and a dangerous dryness in his throat.

"S-sorry. You okay there, Himeragi…?"

Kojou had tried to hold Yukina up to keep her from getting squished, but unable to resist the pressure of the passengers, he'd ended up holding her in his arms from behind. A third party might find it to be an enviable pose to be in, but by this point, Kojou's right hand had long since gone numb.

"Yes…but, ah…"

"Sorry. It ain't like I did this on purpose here…!"

"I know that. It is the same for me. It—it's an act of God, so…!"

The reason Yukina's face was red was that her left arm, still holding her bag, was buried right between Kojou's legs. Yukina wanted to pull her bag away from

him somehow, but in this tight spot, that apparently wasn't going to happen. When combined with the monorail's shaking, the odd stimulation was giving Kojou a pretty rough time.

"It's even worse than usual today," Yukina murmured in a casual tone, perhaps in an effort to take her mind off things.

Certainly, there was always a mix of large numbers of students and commuters at this time in the morning. However, the crowds were rarely so bad. It was close to double the usual amount of passengers.

"Tourists from off the island probably. Festival's gonna start soon."

"The Hollow Eve Festival…is it? It's been a frequent topic among middle school students, too."

"Ah, that's right. You've never seen one before, Himeragi?"

Yukina nodded at Kojou's words.

On special orders from the Lion King Agency, Yukina had begun monitoring Kojou just before the end of summer break.

It hadn't even been two months since she'd come to Itogami Island, and Kojou was unhappily aware that in that short time, they had faced death together several times over.

"I knew that the event existed, but I didn't think it was a festival on such a huge scale."

"They go all out. All the businesses on the island close for the day. It gets way easier for people to get permission to come to Itogami Island, too, so we've got tons of tourists."

As Kojou spoke, he looked up at an advertisement hanging inside the train car.

The Hollow Eve Festival, opening in the last week of October every year, was Itogami Island's biggest festival. There were fireworks displays, outdoor concerts, float parades, and all sorts of other events; the commotion filled the whole island. At this time of year, over two hundred thousand tourists came to visit Itogami Island—a shocking number when you considered the distance of the island from the Japanese mainland.

There was a reason behind those numbers. Normally, no one besides people related to the corporations and research organizations of the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island were permitted to enter. If you were a tourist or journalist who wanted to visit, or you wanted to do business with the corporations in the Demon Sanctuary, festival time was your golden opportunity to get into the city in style.

At any rate, posters for the Hollow Eve Festival had been plastered all over Itogami City for several days. There were TV specials complete with opportunistically targeted commercials, and so forth; there was no mistaking the festive mood stirring throughout the entire island.

“So it’s based on Halloween, then?” Yukina asked as she gazed at the jack-o’-lantern drawn on the poster.

“I guess, yeah. Dunno why they picked Halloween, though,” said Kojou in a quietly dubious voice, as though it were somebody else’s problem.

Itogami Island didn’t have any native people to start with. But a festival, an event that didn’t happen every day, was very effective at pleasing the masses—and stimulating the economy. So, in the name of administrative service, the Gigafloat Management Corporation created the Hollow Eve Festival based on Halloween.

Put another way, they didn’t have any reason *not* to base it on Halloween. For all Kojou cared, they could’ve based it on Valentine’s Day or the Star Festival of *Tanabata*.

But Yukina replied in an unexpectedly overserious tone. “Halloween was originally a ceremony for driving off evil, after all. I believe it is an event well suited to a demon sanctuary.”

“Huh…that’s what you figure?”

“Yes. In the ancient Celtic religion, it was believed the approach of the winter season was a time when paths formed between this world and the world of spirits, making the way for the arrival of spirits and witches. They wore disguises and lit bonfires to protect themselves from monsters, and thus began Halloween.”

“Mmm,” murmured Kojou, accepting her explanation at face value. It hadn’t even been a year since Kojou had—absurdly—become the so-called Fourth Primogenitor. His ordinary high school–level knowledge of superstition, witchcraft, and the occult had proved pretty much useless. He had no intention of pitting his knowledge against Yukina’s, who’d received special education as a Lion King Organization Attack Mage.

“So that’s where Halloween disguises and jack-o’-lanterns come from, huh?”

“Yes. Besides, the Halloween tradition itself is certainly not without basis. After all, it is scientific fact that spatial connections become unstable more easily at this time of year. There are documented instances of encounters with ‘visitors’ from other times and ‘uninvited’ from other worlds.”

“…Gimme a break. I don’t wanna deal with guys like that.”

Kojou’s disagreeable look was in complete seriousness. This was a Demon Sanctuary, after all. You’d never catch him saying it wasn’t possible to meet whacked-out things like that. Even without guys like that, he was already thoroughly fed up from bumping into super-rare stuff like Nalakuvera and Faux-Angels.

And yet, Yukina stared at him with a serious expression. “Yes, senpai, so please do be careful,” she pleaded.

“Huh?” Kojou looked back at Yukina in bewilderment. “Er…be careful, you say. Is my attitude gonna do any good to invaders from another world or whatever?”

More than that, Kojou was shocked by the reality that Yukina seemed to think he *liked* being a magnet for trouble. No student yearned for a peaceful life more than Kojou. And yet…

“Wha…?” Yukina blinked, her eyes looking even more surprised than his. “I mean, you *are* the source of the island’s least stable, most dangerous magical energy, senpai. Please do not let your Beast Vassals run wild and warp an already unstable space. In particular, be on your guard for vampiric ur—”

Before Yukina could finish her line, the monorail began to slow as it approached the station. Obeying the law of inertia, the passengers pitched forward; Kojou, his balance thrown off, found his left hand fondling Yukina’s

breast.

“Senpai…!”

“W-wait! That was a totally unforeseeable circumstance!!”

“No, I don’t mean that—*her*…!”

Yukina’s sharp gaze was trained not on Kojou but on a commuting schoolgirl a short distance away. She wore a Saikai Academy school uniform, but she was even smaller than Yukina. Her long, glossy black hair and unusually pale flesh stood out quite a bit.

“A high school student? Feels like a dangerous spot there.”

Kojou raised his eyebrows as he watched the girl buried in the crowd. She was standing right in a packed corridor with nowhere to run. As the girl bashfully hung her head, a middle-aged man was behaving suspiciously right behind her back.

“Yes. Perhaps that man standing behind her is—”

“A molester?! That bastard—!”

“Wha—?!”

Kojou began charging toward the man with a vigor that caught Yukina completely unprepared. It wasn’t that Kojou had an overinflated sense of justice, but this was still inexcusable evil to him. To Kojou, who had an adolescent little sister, molestation was at the top of his list of unforgivable crimes. If he *ever* caught anyone making sport of Nagisa on her way to school, he’d never be satisfied with just catching him and dragging him to the police.

“Please, senpai, wait! Senpai! We have to be sure before…!”

Yukina tried to keep up as Kojou pushed his way through the passengers. That moment, Kojou confirmed that the man, already at the little schoolgirl’s side, was extending his hand toward the girl’s thigh. Kojou extended his own hand to grab his—and the next moment, the stopped monorail’s door opened wide.

Having spent all that time packed to their limits, the passengers rushed onto the platform as one, catching Kojou in their wake. With all his might, he extended his fingertips forward and ended up touching the small girl’s butt.

That instant, a different hand reached in from the side and firmly caught Kojou's wrist.

"Huh?"

"—Why hello, Mr. Molester. I've caught you in the act," an oddly energetic voice whispered into Kojou's ear. The voice came from a young woman with red hair worn in a twin bun style. She was wearing a Chinese-style shirt and miniskirt. The outfit seemed sporty enough to play actual sports in, and her posture was very good. He felt like he'd seen her face somewhere before.

"H…hey, let go! I'm not a molester, I was just trying to help that girl out…!"

Kojou desperately resisted as he was dragged onto the station platform, but the red-haired woman did not release her firm hold on his wrist. Kojou's bones creaked from the inhuman power of her grip.

"From that uniform, don't tell me you're one of our students? Wait, Akatsuki's big brother?"

"…Eh?!"

Having finally caught up to Kojou, Yukina stopped and called out in surprise.

"Ms. Sasasaki!"

The red-haired woman raised her eyebrows in mild surprise. Seeing this, Kojou finally remembered who she was.

This was Saikai Academy's middle school physical education teacher, Misaki Sasasaki—Yukina and Nagisa's homeroom teacher.

"And you were with him, too, Himeragi? You need to take proper care of your own man."

"It—it's not like that. H-he's not mine, nor is he a molester."

"Is that so?"

With Yukina vouching for Kojou, Misaki finally released his wrist. Kojou, in danger of being falsely accused of molesting a girl, took a very deep breath as sweat rolled down his brow.

Behind Kojou and the others, he heard a lisping but strangely threatening

voice.

“The real molester is over here, you dumb mutt.”

They heard a man make a pathetic cry. Turning around on reflex, Kojou and the others saw the middle-aged fellow, shaking in terror, his entire body wrapped in chains. Dragging him along was the schoolgirl with long, dark hair who had nearly been a molestation victim but a few moments earlier. Kojou finally realized who she really was.

“Huh?”

“…Ms. Minamiya?”

Kojou and Yukina’s voices were totally bewildered.

It was Natsuki Minamiya standing there in a school uniform. Saikai Academy’s high school English teacher’s self-proclaimed age was twenty-six. However, based on her face, her silhouette, and the details of her body, the term *teenager* fit better, if not *little girl*.

“Wait, you’re Natsuki? Why are you dressed like that?”

“On patrol. A lot of students have been molested on trains lately.”

“…Why a high school uniform?”

“We can’t be using students as decoys for a molester investigation, so I’m in disguise. I realize it’s pushing it.”

“Now I see,” said Kojou in acceptance. She might have looked young, but Natsuki was an incredibly skilled Attack Mage. She was so accomplished that her *side job* was working as an instructor for the Island Guard. Many demons knew and feared her by her nickname, the “Witch of the Void.” Assigning her to draw out a mere molester was titanic overkill. And there weren’t very many teachers who would look so convincing in a school uniform.

“It’s not pushing it, you’re a total natural in it… If anything, the middle school uniform would suit you better.”

“You see, Natsuki? It’s exactly like I said, isn’t it?”

Misaki smiled proudly and thrust her chest out. Though she was a bit short of a

hundred and sixty centimeters in height herself, paired with the tiny Natsuki, they completely looked like parent and child.

Not appreciating this, Natsuki shooed Misaki away. “No one asked you. Besides, I didn’t have any uniforms left over from middle school, so I had no choice.”

“Left over… Wait, you used to wear that uniform, Natsuki?”

Kojou reflexively looked all over Natsuki’s uniform. Now that she mentioned it, the size *was* perfect, even though she was only as tall as an elementary school student. If that was her own personal uniform, it meant Natsuki had graduated from Saikai Academy, which was news to Kojou’s ears.

“Don’t call your homeroom teacher by her first name.” Natsuki’s lips gloomily twisted. “Why are you so respectful to that dumb mutt when you call me by my first name?”

“Guess it’s difference in authority and personality,” said Misaki.

“Stop petting me!”

Misaki was petting Natsuki’s head like she was fawning over a little girl. Natsuki glared at her fellow teacher. Natsuki, whose ego was unparalleled, somehow had a hard time dealing only with Misaki Sasasaki, whom she’d known since her school days. Maybe it was just in their natures.

Kojou spoke up as he watched the two teachers tease each other.

“Well, that’s how it is, so can we go now? We’re already running short on time.”

Misaki glanced at the middle-aged man wrapped in chains and laughed shamelessly at him.

“That’s fine. We caught the real molester, after all.”

Kojou and Yukina made light bows to the pair of lady teachers and walked toward the ticket examiner. It was still morning, but Kojou already felt dead tired.

That was when Natsuki called out to him.

“Kojou Akatsuki.”

“Yes?” Kojou turned to look innocently back, and he saw a strange look come over Natsuki. Not being able to read her emotions was standard, but something about her was different now. She had a smile on her face like one you wore just after meeting an old friend, with longing and heartbreak thrown into the mix.

“It’ll be the Hollow Eve Festival soon.”

“Yeah. It will.” Though thrown off, Kojou managed to keep pace with her.

“Hmph,” went Natsuki through her nostrils. She made the same imperious smile she always did. Then, she spoke with a haughty tone of voice.

“Classes resume normally at the beginning of next week. Make sure you’re not late getting back.”

2

In the final week of October when the Hollow Eve Festival would begin, Saikai Academy went on school holiday starting the day before the festival.

To the people in clubs that were participating in events like concert band performances and classroom displays, those who would be working on or appearing on floats sponsored by city businesses, those working part-time jobs,

or those who simply wanted to enjoy the festival to the fullest, the Hollow Eve Festival was a time of year when the students of Itogami City were frantic with activity.

There were numerous advisories from the school in an effort to keep the students out of trouble. Consequently, here on the day before the school holiday was to begin, homeroom time was extended so that everyone's homeroom teacher could drill these advisories into them.

But this, too, was a yearly ritual. High schoolers who'd heard it all before were even less likely to pay much attention. And that was when something completely at odds with all common sense occurred in Kojou Akatsuki's class.

It was a slender, little girl who stood on the teacher's lectern.

She had indigo-blue hair and blue eyes. Her beautiful visage had a completely artificial symmetry to it. The girl was a homunculus, born through industrial processes wrought by man.

Of course, no student in a Demon Sanctuary like this was going to do a double take over a homunculus. But the fact that she was clad in a very exposing apron dress and that she was reading the list of advisories in the capacity of substitute teacher—*that* was unusual.

"A maid… Hey, that's Natsuki's personal maid, isn't it?"

"Why is a maid teaching?"

"She's called Astarte, right…? She's cute."

"Hey, the bigger deal is this rumor going around that Natsuki was wearing a school uniform at the station."

"…Yeah, she could totally pull that off."

Even as the students, who had not yet grasped the situation, fiercely whispered among one another, all eyes were on Astarte's every word and deed. As a result, she faithfully accomplished her primary mission of conveying the festival time advisories to the class.

"…What the heck was that all about?" Now that she had done her duty, the homunculus girl returned to the teacher's waiting room. Asagi Aiba posed the

question to Kojou as she watched the girl head off. She was a schoolgirl with a gorgeous hairstyle and a uniform scraping by regulations in just the right places.

“She said it herself, didn’t she? Natsuki’s absent and asked her to fill in.”

“Hmm. I guess an Attack Mage would be busier right before the festival?” Asagi murmured back, seeming to tentatively buy it. Kojou had been on the fence but kept quiet about Natsuki going around town looking like she was cosplaying a high school girl. She’d get scary if she heard he’d damaged her reputation in any way.

Besides, school was going to be out in short order, well before noon. All that was left was putting their things together and heading home.

The monorail’s probably a lot less packed by now, Kojou thought to himself as he prepared to leave, when he met Asagi’s eyes. She looked like she wanted to say something.

What? Kojou wondered, casually tilting his head a bit. Asagi seemed resolute as she opened her mouth.

The very next instant, Kojou was suddenly surrounded by a mob of noisy male classmates.

“Hey, Akatsuki. You scheduled to get into any Hollow Eve Festival events?”

“Nah. Hadn’t decided on anything.”

The classmates had dubious looks on their faces as Kojou replied to the question. Hearing his answer, the boys’ eyes seemed to glimmer. They were like a pack of carnivorous beasts with prey in their sights.

“That so. Why don’t you work part-time, then? We’ve got an open café scheduled in town, but we’re a few people short. Of course, you’ll get paid for it. How’s 250 yen an hour sound?”

“Wait, Kojou! If you’re gonna be working, be a salesboy at our booth! We’ll give you a commission of ten…no, twenty percent of sales!”

“Hold on, Kojou! Don’t forget there’s the legendary Hollow Eve Festival beach volleyball tournament!

“Don’t you wanna work up a sweat with us with all that sand and fresh air?”

“Stop right there! Beauty pageants are the soul of any festival. We want you as a special judge. So come to Thetis Mall today like your life depends on it!!”

“Uh…umm?”

A guarded look came over Kojou in the face of his classmates’ coercive invitations. Seeing them like that, Asagi appeared displeased. She called over to a good friend. “Hey, Rin…what’s all that?” she asked in a low voice.

“Hee-hee. Akatsuki’s very popular, you see.” Rin Tsukishima narrowed her eyes and laughed mischievously. Her teasing tone brought an “ugh” from Asagi as her cheek twitched. She was a tall, stylish girl with the air of an adult, classifying Rin as a “cool beauty” type, but she was surprisingly talkative and had razor-sharp intuition. She seemed perfectly well aware of *why* Asagi was in a foul mood.

“Well, it’s not so much Kojou as it is Himeragi, y’see,” Motoki Yaze interjected in his eternally flippant tone of voice.

He was Kojou’s “bad” friend, as well as an old friend of Asagi’s from back when they were primary schoolers.

Asagi’s mood worsened further upon hearing the girl’s name from Yaze’s lips.

“Himeragi—you mean the middle school transfer student?”

Noticing the change in Asagi, Yaze made a worldly looking nod.

“It’s well-known that for whatever reason, wherever Kojou goes, she goes. If Kojou gets into *X*, Himeragi gets into *X*, too, and that’s a big deal. They’ll get lots of customers for sure, then.”

Asagi voiced her low opinion of the matter. “They’re all a complete pack of idiots.”

Essentially, they were inviting Kojou as bait for getting Yukina Himeragi to join in. It was true that Yukina was a lovely and captivating girl, and any event she participated in would have customers flock over to get a good look at her.

As Asagi put her chin in her palms and sulked, Rin asked with a look of even greater pleasure, “You’re all right with this, Asagi?”

Asagi looked back in annoyance. “With what?”

“The Hollow Eve Festival. You wanted to go to it with Akatsuki, didn’t you?”

“Um…” Asagi froze on reflex as the sudden question hit the mark.

Like festivals in general, the Hollow Eve Festival was a serious matter for couples. There were haunted houses, fireworks displays, as well as fortune-telling, stalls selling charms for deepening bonds—the Demon Sanctuary was just full of stuff like that. The reason Asagi was hesitating about inviting Kojou was that it was hard to make it sound casual.

Meanwhile, the boys in class continued to invite Kojou to their various events.

“Ah…er, thanks for the invitations, but I’ve gotta say no.”

There was a minor uproar within the classroom as Kojou declined with unexpected firmness. “What?! What’s the problem with this?! We’ll even let you drink coffee for free!”

“How about twenty-f— No, thirty percent, you jerk!”

“You don’t get it, Akatsuki! You still do not grasp the profoundness of beach volleyball!!”

“If being a judge isn’t enough for you, how about being one of the male contestants?!”

The classmates pressed Kojou to change his mind. But Kojou scratched his languid-looking face.

“Er, I made a promise to go out to the festival with someone this year, so I can’t. Sorry.”

All at once, bloodlust surged in various people as they heard Kojou’s words.

“A promise to go out with someone…?! You mean the transfer student in middle school?! Is that it?!”

“The transfer student? Ah no, nothing to do with Himeragi here.”

Kojou’s casual reply threw the invitation makers completely off. Without exception, their gazes shifted in Asagi’s direction.

“…Not…the transfer student?”

“So, you mean Aiba, then?”

“Aiba, huh…? Well, we can settle for Aiba.”

“Yeah, Aiba would work, come to think of it. Can’t be helped. We definitely need Akatsuki in our event now…”

“….She looks really pissed for some reason, though.”

The boys’ not-so-private discussion made Asagi’s lips twitch repeatedly. Rin and Yaze only sighed in apparent pity.

That moment, someone at the classroom entrance called out to Kojou in a loud voice.

“Akatsuki! Visitor for you! A girl from middle school.”

This time, the bizarre timing caused a far larger commotion in the classroom.

“What?!”

“The transfer student?! Then it’s really the transfer student? Aiba’s just for pretend?!”

“No, wait! That’s…!”

“It can’t be! The Saint of Middle School…?!”

The one calling Kojou’s name was Yuuha Tanahara of the same class. A girl with almost translucent silver hair stood behind her back, as if she was hiding behind it.

She wore a long-sleeved, long-necked undershirt under her middle school uniform, which made her come off almost like a nun. In a certain sense, her beautiful visage stood out even more than Yukina’s.

She was Kanon Kanase, a third-year student in middle school. Also known as “the Saint” for her looks and the air of kindness around her, she had many fans even among the high school boys. Though not public knowledge, she was also a princess of the Aldegian royal house. No doubt that accounted for the sublime elegance that made her difficult to approach.

And just like that, Kojou casually spoke to Kanon, not even noticing the looks they were getting. “Kanase? You came to school, huh?”

“Ah yes. I’m sorry to intrude upon your class, but…”

“No, that’s totally all right. You’re feeling better now?”

“Yes, I left the hospital the other day.”

Kojou and Kanon were having an intimate conversation, as if they were old acquaintances. The students in the classroom hung on their every word and action.

Rin Tsukishima lowered her voice and whispered into Asagi’s ear. “How did they become acquainted?”

“There’s no way I’d know something like that!”

Blood rushed into Asagi’s head as she replied. She knew that Kojou and Yukina had gotten wrapped up in some kind of trouble involving Kanon Kanase not long before. However, Kojou’s excuses glossed over all the details; she still didn’t know *why* he’d been involved in an incident like that. And not even noticing that Asagi was glaring at him, there was Kojou, standing next to Kanon and making a frivolous smile.

“So you came all this way to say hi?”

“Yes. Also, there is a favor I wanted to ask you.”

Kojou seemed surprised as he replied. “A favor? Me?”

Kanon bashfully lowered her eyes a little. “Yes, ah…”

As the silver-haired girl’s voice hesitantly trailed off, Kojou’s classmates held their breath, waiting for her to continue. Finally, Kanon strongly raised her face and asked Kojou in a voice full of tension…

“Could I go to your place and…stay over tonight?”

That moment, what seemed like a cold silence came over the classroom. Only Asagi had an expression of complete shock as she raised her voice in a “Wha—?!” Then…

Kojou’s demeanor was casual as he accepted Kanon’s request.

“Sure, I don’t mind at all, but…”

Asagi’s eyes opened wide and froze like that as her shoulders shook as if she was touching a live wire.

“Wh-wha—?!”

Watching from beside her, Yaze made an exasperated-looking shake of his head.

Rin strongly grabbed Asagi’s wrist and dramatically raised both of their hands together.

“Hold it right there!” The classroom was shaken once more as if there was an earthquake happening. Even Kojou and Kanon were compelled to notice the odd aura and look over. Rin grinned as she informed Kojou of the resolution. “We will be joining you. You don’t mind, do you, Akatsuki?”

Kojou had a stupefied look on his face as he replied with a question. “Huh?”

Asagi still had no idea what on earth was going on as she glanced between the bewildered Kojou, the pleasantly smiling Rin and the others, and her own hand raised up high; then, she shouted…

“Whaaaaat?!”

There were two days left until the Hollow Eve Festival. Signs of the rising festive mood came into sharper and sharper perspective.

3

Island South was Itogami Island’s southern district full of residential neighborhoods. Here the Akatsuki siblings lived in an apartment building built on top of a gentle artificial hill.

Their room number was 704. It was arranged in a standard three-bedroom, kitchen, dining room, living room arrangement. The spectacular view from the window contrasted the evening sky with the Itogami City skyline spread below them and dyed red by the rays of the setting sun.

The large plates on the glass dining table were piled high with food.

Kanon was standing in her school uniform, looking down at the cooking and feeling very out of place. As an expression tinged with tension came over her face, the sound of fireworks erupted, as if meant to make her cower.

Nagisa Akatsuki called out as the firecrackers filled the air with noise. “Kanon, congrats on getting out of the hospital!”

She was a third-year middle school student, just like Yukina and Kanon, and also Kojou’s biological little sister. She looked a bit more childish than other girls her age, but as a whole, she was a very capable little sister. Her looks were on the cute side; her grades were so-so. She was skilled at every kind of housework. Her biggest flaw was her propensity to talk too much, but rather mysteriously, she never seemed to irritate anyone with it.

Most of the food on the table was her home cooking.

Kanon looked around with an embarrassed but grateful expression as confetti fell all over her body.

“Um, ah… I’m sorry to have made you go through all this trouble just for me…”

Nagisa spoke in an even brighter voice, as if seeing Kanon like that only encouraged her further.

“What are you saying? You’re today’s guest of honor. Here, sit, sit! Eat, eat! I’m really proud of this salad. It’s got homemade dressing with walnut, peanut, and sesame in it. This here’s Tanaya’s Itogami Croquette Deluxe. This here’s the Nagisa Special Red-Hot Chili Beans Grand Finale. The Neapolitan carbonara pasta’s almost finished boiling, too.”

Kanon smiled pleasantly but awkwardly, perhaps cowed a bit by Nagisa’s vigor. “Th-thank you.”

Yaze, brazenly sitting right next to Kanon, immediately reached out with his chopsticks.

“Whoa, this is delicious. That’s Nagisa for you. Have you gotten even better?”

Asagi happily put a hand to her cheek as she brought some soup served cold to her lips.

“It really is. Her being Kojou’s little sister is kind of a waste.”

Kojou, chased off to the corner of the living room, glared at the girls with a dumbfounded look.

“Why are you all here at Kanon’s recovery party, too?”

“Hey, don’t say that. It’s something good to celebrate, the more the merrier, right?”

“Just so you know, Kojou, I paid for the meat you’re eating.”

“Ughh.”

Kojou made an exasperated sigh at Yaze and Asagi’s thoroughly shameless behavior. Actually, Kojou still had no idea why they’d suddenly proclaimed they were coming to his place.

The fact was, their having come was making it a bit easier for him anyway.

Even if it was a recovery party for an acquaintance, he naturally felt a fair bit of awkwardness at the prospect of eating a meal surrounded by girls the same age as his little sister.

Asagi suddenly posed a question while taking a break from her food.

“…So, what *is* your relationship to Kanase, anyway?”

Whatever impression her looks gave, she was a voracious eater. Nagisa plopped new food onto Asagi’s empty plate time and time again.

“I explained yesterday. Kanase was getting treatment for her illness at Magus Craft, and Himeragi and I gave blood to help out. Right, Himeragi?”

“Yes. Th-that’s right. I’m sorry to have worried you all because we were in such a hurry.”

Kojou and Yukina smoothly gave their explanations. They’d made sure their stories matched for just such an occasion. But detecting that such a smooth excuse was unnatural in and of itself, an obvious look of doubt came over Asagi. “So, what’s the business with the princess?”

“Well, like I said, Kanase’s dad was the royal sorcerous engineer of Aldegia when he was younger, so that’s why she was coming to visit.”

“Hmm.”

Kojou and Yukina’s explanation differed notably from the truth, but given the relationships between the various people, it wasn’t much of a lie, either. Though Asagi clearly didn’t buy the whole thing, she apparently gave up on pursuing the

matter further.

Instead, it was the final participant who spoke from the direction of Kojou's room.

"Hmm…so this is Akatsuki's room. Surprisingly normal. Hmm, very interesting."

"Could you, like, not go into other people's bedrooms and look under their beds, Tsukishima?" Kojou called out in a shrill voice, watching Rin from behind as she leaned down to the floor.

She was known for acting cool and collected with everyone else no matter who they were, but her behavior toward Kojou was a little different. Rin, whose father was a famous scholar of demonic biology, was exceptionally well versed about the characteristics of demons. Thanks to that, Kojou felt that Rin acted from time to time like she'd figured out he wasn't a normal human being.

That said, she'd never looked at Kojou with any hint of hostility. Evidently she had no intention of rocking the boat. She came off as the classical amused observer. No doubt her insistence on coming to the Akatsuki residence was part of that inquisitiveness.

Rin seemed to take great interest in Kojou's shelf.

"I found an album. Can I take a peek?"

"Go ahead, but that's just something from elementary school. Doubt it's got anything interesting."

Kojou had meant to warn her to take good care of it, but the girls seemed to all get a different idea. Now Asagi and Yukina gathered around Rin, looking much more interested now that he'd opened his big mouth.

As she flipped the album's pages, Rin raised her eyebrows in apparent amusement.

"Aw, widdle Akatsuki. Hmm, he looks much the same, doesn't he?"

Yukina stared intently as she conveyed her own impressions.

"So senpai was an elementary schooler once, too. Cute…perhaps?"

"What's with the 'perhaps'?! Just say I was, dammit!" bitterly complained a

dejected Kojou.

Kanon giggled and smiled as she listened to the exchange. “So this is from just before Kojou moved to Itogami City, huh?”

Asagi was the one who checked the time stamp on the photo. “Seems that way. All the other ones were clearly taken when he was still in primary.”

Kojou had met her immediately after moving to Itogami Island some four years before. Kojou had only just entered middle school.

“Who’s that? They’re together in a lot of these photos.” Yaze picked up the album as he asked.

Kojou was photographed with a teammate in the same basketball uniform. The youth was heavily sunburned but was a primary schooler with a very energetic face.

“Ah yeah, that’s Yuuma.”

“Yuuma?”

“Someone we played with when we were little kids. Pal from basketball when I was young… We were kinda like two rotten apples in a barrel.”

“Really,” went Rin, narrowing her eyes in apparent admiration.

“Quite handsome. Completely wasted on a friend like you, Akatsuki.”

Kojou lamented, his lips twisted like that really hurt.

“What’s that supposed to mean?! So what if my friend looks better than me?!”

For his part, Yaze glared at the photo with an expression that didn’t look fake at all.

“Shit. I thought *I* was Kojou’s only good friend, but to think the guy before me looked this awesome!”

Asagi scowled, looking like she deeply resented this. “You two are both totally creeping me out…”

Kojou’s eyes bulged on reflex.

“What, me, too?!”

Nagisa burst into laughter. “Unlike Kojou here, Yuuma was definitely popular with the girls back then.”

“Yeah.” Kojou grudgingly nodded. His old friend was very popular with the ladies.

Then, as if only just remembering, Nagisa whipped out her cell phone and opened up her mail screen.

“Oh right, I got an e-mail a little earlier. Yuuma’s arriving at the airport at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Yaze looked back in visible surprise. He stuck out a quivering finger at Kojou’s album.

“Huh? You mean *he’s* coming to Itogami Island?” Kojou replied with a tone of indifference as Nagisa carried in a plate full of pasta.

“That’s right. Apparently a relative twisted some arms and got Yuuma a Hollow Eve Festival ticket.”

The whole reason he’d dug up the old album in the first place was to prepare for the reunion with his old friend.

“That’s right, you said you’d promised to show someone around town this year, didn’t you, Akatsuki?” Rin spoke as if her suspicions had suddenly been completely cleared up.

“Yeah. I promised I’d show Yuuma around the island,” Kojou said as he brought some pasta to his lips.

Rin had a satisfied look on her face, smiling at Asagi as if to console her. “If it’s to show a friend around, it can’t be helped. Right, Asagi?”

Asagi, having returned to her seat at the table, assaulted her food once more with even greater vigor. “It’s fine. I figured it was something like that anyway.”

Nagisa beamed at the sight of her cooking rapidly disappearing.

Asagi suddenly gave the food a rest and looked at Yukina seated beside her. Asagi drew close to her face and asked in a whisper, “Hey…did you know about Kojou’s friend coming…?”

“No,” said Yukina, shaking her head in apparent disappointment. “This is the first I’ve heard of his plans for the festival.”

The two traded a glance and sighed at the same time.

“That’s just like him.”

“…It is, isn’t it?”

What the heck’s that all about…? Kojou wondered; for no concrete reason, seeing the two express such an odd amount of sympathy for the other made him feel uneasy.

4

Despite much concern and consternation before it began, the party ended peacefully and festively.

Kanon, the guest of honor, happily listened to Nagisa’s ceaseless banter and Yaze’s stupid stories without a single disagreeable look on her face; getting to observe Kojou’s private life apparently made Rin content as well.

Asagi and Yukina were in a heated rhythm and dance video game duel, their tension level approaching desperation for reasons unknown. In one corner was Yukina, boasting superhumanly fast reflexes; in the other was Asagi, possessing a genius’s intuition and deep knowledge of computer algorithms. Their white-hot battle resulted in the pounding out of unheard-of high scores, but ended without a clear winner. Kojou had a hard time telling if they were getting along great or if they hated each other’s guts.

Since Asagi and the others hadn’t made any preparations to stay the night, they had to leave in time to catch the last train home. Only Kojou and three middle school students remained in the Akatsuki residence.

Apparently Kanon and Yukina were going to sleep over in Nagisa’s room. Kojou, the odd man out, holed up in his own room and tucked himself into bed immediately.

Kojou and Nagisa’s mother, who bore the impressive title of chief of research at one of the corporations in the city, didn’t get back home for one or two weeks

at a time. For her not to have returned by this hour meant that she was probably sleeping at her workplace yet again.

That said, surely even she wouldn't miss out on a home visit when the lab was shut down for the Hollow Eve Festival. Besides, Yuuma was arriving. Tomorrow looked set to be another rambunctious day.

Kojou stared up at the ceiling for a good long while as he thought deeply about things like that.

It was business as usual, but he couldn't sleep.

Kojou had been a night owl to begin with, and the tendency had only grown stronger since becoming a vampire. It had gotten extreme enough that he would've preferred to be asleep during the day and be up at night if he could.

But that would of course impact his high school life, and besides, Nagisa would no doubt notice he was a vampire if he did such a thing. That was something he had to avoid at all costs. He couldn't let her know that her own big brother had become a demon.

In the midst of another sleepless, worry-filled night, Kojou's ears heard a rather reserved voice.

"…Akatsuki."

For an instant, he thought he was hearing things, but when he looked harder, Kojou saw that his bedroom door was ever so slightly open. He could see beautifully glittering silver hair through the crack.

"Um, are you still awake?"

"…Kanase?"

When Kojou replied in a small voice, Kanon poked her face in with a relieved look. She politely bowed her head and entered the room. Then, she quietly shut the door behind her.

She was dressed in pajamas that stretched to her knees. The pale blue fabric being the same color as her eyes, they suited Kanon particularly well.

Kojou turned toward Kanon and sat up, giving her a bewildered look. For a moment, he wondered if this was "stealing into someone's bedroom" like he'd

heard rumors about, but instantly dismissed the possibility. He didn't think a girl like Kanon, raised by nuns and even dubbed a saint, would engage in such behavior.

"What is it, at a time like this?"

"I wanted to have a private conversation with you."

"Conversation?"

"Yes," said Kanon, nodding with a serious look.

Kojou moved to the corner of the bed and gave Kanon space to sit down. Kanon blushed a little as she settled her hips down next to Kojou. Then, she put on another meek look and continued, "I wanted to speak to you about Faux-Angel."

Kojou's expression turned grave.

"…Do you remember when you became an angel?"

Faux-Angel was a being brought into existence by using sorcerous means to shift a human body to that of a higher being. Kanon, naturally suited to being a powerful spirit medium due to the Aldegian royal blood coursing through her, had been selected as a test subject. And for a time, she had arrived at an angelic form indistinguishable from the real thing. However, she'd paid a heavy price as part of such a reckless experiment, conceived to turn a human being into an angel by force. She'd been pitted into deadly combat against fellow Faux-Angels; finally, Kanon's own self-awareness began to fade away. Furthermore, the Faux-Angels produced through such means were viewed by others as mere weapons.

In the end, Kojou and Yukina were able to save Kanon from the horrible circumstances that had befallen her. However, neither of them had any intention of telling Kanon any such thing.

Besides, the truth was, Kojou had more *fought* her than saved her. A single misstep and Kojou and Yukina would have killed her. They thought that telling Kanon such a thing would only bring her greater anguish. When they'd heard Kanon had no memory of her time as Faux-Angel, both thought her amnesia was really for the best.

But if Kanon *hadn't* lost her memory of it, that was a completely different story.

It seemed that Kanon had come to quietly visit Kojou to press him about the events of that day.

However, Kojou was at a loss as to how to logically explain things while being considerate of Kanon's feelings. Also, telling her the truth naturally meant exposing the fact that he was a vampire. That was another reason Kojou hesitated. If Nagisa's friend knew the truth about him, that increased the odds Nagisa herself would learn of it.

It was a dark room with no light source on. On top of the narrow bed, Kojou met Kanon's eyes without any clue how he was going to talk his way out of this one.

It was then that Nagisa suddenly knocked on the door.

"I hear someone talking. Kojou, are you still awake…?"

The door opened suddenly without waiting for Kojou's reply.

Just before that, Kojou pushed Kanon against the top of the bed, completely hiding her under the quilt as he got under it himself. Kanon was about to raise her voice when Kojou covered her mouth with his palm, telling her with his eyes, *Stay quiet!*

Fortunately, Nagisa seemed to buy that Kojou was asleep, not noticing that Kanon was hidden under the quilt.

"…Geez, Kojou. Don't set the thermostat so low."

Picking up the remote lying on top of a desk, she turned off the air conditioner before making a sleepy-sounding yawn.

"Mm…bathroom…bathroom…"

With that, Nagisa left the room. Kojou finally relaxed as he felt her presence grow distant. Hidden under the quilt, Kanon also sighed in relief.

Quite possibly Nagisa had grown a bit restless when she realized that Kanon hadn't been sleeping in her room like she was supposed to. It was beyond all doubt that Nagisa would fly into a rage if she saw him with Kanon at a time like

this.

“Looks like we didn’t get busted there,” said Kojou.

Kanon smiled charmingly as only her eyes looked out from under the quilt.

“My heart was really beating.”

Kojou’s own heart was beating just as much. “Sorry for dragging you under the quilt like that.”

“It’s fine. It was actually kind of fun.” Kanon brought her face right up to Kojou’s ear as she spoke. The unexpected closeness made Kojou’s entire body go rigid once more. He understood that it was only so that her voice wouldn’t carry outside the room, but even so, it was an awfully suggestive position on top of a bed.

“K-Kanase…um…”

“I came to thank you. I have learned how you and Yukina saved me.”

“Eh…?”

“I heard all about it from Ms. Natsuki…about my father’s research…and what you really are…”

Kojou drew in his breath in the face of Kanon’s sudden confession. Due to her father’s participation in the Faux-Angel experiment, Natsuki Minamiya was currently acting as Kanon’s guardian.

So Kanon had already heard everything from Natsuki’s lips: the truth about the incident and the truth about Kojou, too?

Kanon continued to speak into the shaken Kojou’s ears. Her words somehow held a tone of admiration. “You’re really a hero, aren’t you?”

“Huh…?!”

Kanon’s *completely* unexpected words stunned Kojou into silence. Kojou had not the slightest clue what she was talking about. But Kanon continued in a very serious tone of voice. “Ms. Natsuki told me all about it. How you were captured by an evil organization and converted into a Mystical Warrior, and how you work for the peace of Itogami Island without anyone knowing…”

Despondent, with no rock to crawl under, Kojou's voice shook. "Wh…wh-why that…little shrimp…!"

Either because she couldn't think of a good explanation or because she decided halfway it was too much trouble, Natsuki had apparently gotten Kanon to believe a story worthy of a comic book.

In a way it made sense, and it managed to hide the fact that Kojou was a vampire, but he wondered if she couldn't have coughed up a slightly more sensible excuse. It was very like Kanon to believe it, though.

"…Um, Kanase. Could you please not tell Nagisa about this?" said Kojou, his voice frail.

He was having an unexpectedly serious inner conflict about which was better: being exposed as a vampire or mistaken for a cyborg.

"I understand. A hero's identity is secret even from his own family," said Kanon with a firm nod.

Seeing this, Kojou decided there was no point ruminating about the matter any further and so switched emotional gears. "By the way, Kanase, are you all right? I mean, sleeping over right after getting out of the hospital."

"Yes. Physically I'm quite all right. Ms. Natsuki gave me permission, too."

"Ah, okay. Glad to hear it."

"Yes. Astarte also did a great deal for me."

Kanon's reply made Kojou let out a relieved smile. Apparently her new life at Natsuki's place was going pretty well.

But just as Kojou began to relax, he heard footsteps from the corridor once more. Apparently Nagisa was coming back after having taken care of necessities.

As Kanon became flustered, Kojou pushed her onto the bed once more, pulling the blanket up to his own shoulders. The two were practically hugging each other as they waited for Nagisa to pass by.

But that moment, Kojou was shaken when he noticed an unexpected sensation he was getting from Kanon pressed up against him.

“Kanase. By any chance, um, under your pajamas…?”

“Yes?”

Kanon looked up at Kojou with a mystified look. On reflex, Kojou averted his eyes, unable to look straight at her guileless expression.

Something was pressing against his body; though modestly sized, the pressure was a soft and yielding one. His animal instincts were certain of it: She wasn’t wearing a bra right now. Apparently, Kanon was of the persuasion not to wear one at bedtime.

“Akatsuki?” Kanon asked in apparent concern, noticing Kojou’s small shudder. But right now Kojou did not have the luxury of replying.

It wasn’t that he was ill. Kojou was being assaulted by a simple biological phenomenon. But this was an abominable, pernicious condition exclusive to the vampire body: namely, the urge to drink blood.

Though still subject to numerous misunderstandings in the world at large, the species known as vampires did not drink the blood of others for sustenance. The true trigger for vampiric urges was not hunger, but physical arousal; in other words, *lust*.

“What is it, Akatsuki? Is it that you’re not feeling w…?!”

“I’m all right…so, please don’t press too tight. This is just a little, um…”

Kanon leaned in, peering at Kojou’s face with a look of worry. He was grateful for her concern, but as she leaned, she exposed both her white neck and her breasts, stimulating Kojou even further.

His field of vision became crimson hued with arousal, and his canine teeth lengthened and throbbed.

At this rate, he’d completely lose his senses—or so he thought when, a moment later, the sweet, metallic taste of blood spread throughout his mouth.

Kanon let out a yelp. “Akatsuki, your nose is bleeding?!”

However, Kojou was relieved to feel the trickle of the nosebleed. The taste had temporarily driven his vampiric urges away. He had no trouble with the taste of his own blood. Even if it meant being mistaken for having a nosebleed from the

embrace of a middle school student, it meant Kanon wasn't going to be hurt, and that was good.

What smashed Kojou's fleeting sense of accomplishment to tiny, unrecognizable bits was the quiet voice he heard from the doorway to his room.

"…What are you doing with Kanase in the middle of the night, senpai?"

"H-Himeragi?!"

Realizing who the speaker was, Kojou's expression froze solid. At some point Yukina, wearing a monochrome set of pajamas, came to stand inside Kojou's room, her emotionless expression like ice.

Nagisa was standing next to her in polka-dot pajamas. Her untied hair seemed to stand on end as her shoulders silently quivered. Apparently she was so angry that she couldn't speak. That was a very bad sign.

Kojou shook his head with a look of desperation.

"Wait, it's not! It's not like that. We're just having a really important conversation…"

But Yukina half-closed her eyes as she sighed icily. "An important conversation in bed?"

“In a situation like this, anything you say only sounds like an excuse…!” Nagisa declared in a low, suppressed voice.

Sweat coursed down Kojou’s back.

“…I suppose so,” said Kanon.

Not noticing the bloodlust their conversation with Kojou held, Kanon looked up at Kojou, the only one concerned about his bleeding.

“The nosebleed isn’t stopping. What will I do…? Ah, that’s right…!”

Suddenly standing up forcefully, Kanon raised her hand high in position for a karate chop. Kojou sensed that she was unintentionally gathering a large amount of ritual energy into her flattened hand.

Though she was wholly unaware of it, Kanon was royalty—a direct descendant of the Aldegian royal family. If measuring only raw potential, she was a spirit medium rivaling Yukina in strength.

“I have heard that this can be healed immediately with a blow to the back of the head!”

Kojou panicked as he realized what Kanon intended. “Wait a sec, you’ve got your first aid wrong! Good girls shouldn’t copy stuff from TV, it’s dangerous—!”

If she gave a Shrine Maiden Chop to the back of his head, he didn’t think even an immortal vampire would escape unscathed. Even without that, it was dangerous to mix up your first aid.

However, Kojou’s plea for mercy was in vain, with Kanon bringing her chop down together with her cute voice. “Yah!”

Kojou’s vision went dark as the lethal blow hit home.

The last things Kojou saw with the final traces of his consciousness were Yukina, covering her eyes as she told him that he was reaping what he’d sown, and his own sister, with a cold, scornful look on her face.

5

In the ninth lunar month, a couple of days after the first crescent with the moon swollen beyond half its size, the southwestern sky sparkled bright.

The Demon Sanctuary's night was long. Many demons were fond of the night; also, in cities with a high population of transient demons, businesses offering food and entertainment continued to operate until nearly the crack of dawn.

On the other hand, somewhat removed from the bustle of the city, the island was surrounded by the dark, wide-open nighttime sea, where not even the light of the neon signs reached. The rough waves of the ocean crashed ceaselessly against the cliffs of the artificial island, spreading cold sea spray all about. A twisted, mocking voice echoed across the swaying, velvetlike surface of the sea.

A woman dressed in a red outfit spoke.

"Just as before, a horrid city, my sister."

Her clothes were very revealing; you'd think she was a dancer from a foreign country. She wore sensational garter stockings along with a sorceress's robe and a long hood. All were dyed scarlet, like the color of blood.

Judging by appearance, she was about twenty. From her clothes, she might be thought a harlot, or, seen from the back alone, perhaps a priestess. However, the ominous atmosphere wafting all around her brought only one word to mind —*witch*.

The other intoxicating voice replied to the scarlet woman with a laugh. "Yes, very much so."

This woman was in jet-black. She wore a wide-brimmed, triangular hat over her head, a black mantle over her shoulders, and a black leather bondage rider suit; in one sense, the air about her was more erotic than if she had been completely nude.

Her appearance, too, could only be called that of a witch.

A scarlet witch and a black witch.

Calmly walking over the surface of the very sea, the two set foot upon the artificial land of Itogami Island.

The next moment, a dazzling searchlight rudely shone upon them.

Fortified against the cliffs on the side of the road was a force of well-armed riot police. Their shields had defensive magical runes engraved into them; their firearms were loaded with special anti-demon rounds.

This was the Island Guard's interdiction unit. In accordance with their mission, they were brimming with combat experience and powerful weaponry.

However, the witches gave the guardsmen a look of scorn, sighing with a lack of enthusiasm.

"They seem unamused, my sister."

"You'd think they'd give us a warmer welcome, returning after ten years like this."

As they spoke quite casually, the two continued to walk toward the city. Their behavior was quite arrogant, completely heedless of the gun barrels aimed right at them.

The Island Guard squad leader shouted. His loudspeaker-amplified voice seemed to make the very coastal air shake.

"Attention, intruders: You are violating the jurisdiction of a Demon Sanctuary. In accordance with the Special Security Measures Act, you are under arrest. Immediately lower your spell wards and follow our instructions. You have ten seconds. This is your final warning. If you do not comply, we will detain you by force."

The guardsmen took the safeties off their weapons.

They were equipped with large-caliber ritual energy rounds and electrum chip rounds capable of neutralizing even beast men. One solid hit and the witch's physical bodies would be blown to bits.

Regardless, the witches' cold, mocking smiles did not falter.

"The peasants are in an uproar."

"Let us indulge in some amusement, shall we?"

The squad leader continued his countdown. The two witches continued walking, even past the allotted ten seconds. After a bitter expression came over the squad leader momentarily, he shouted in an unmoved tone of voice.

“Fire!”

Blue sparks scattered into the darkness. The sound of countless gunshots blended into a single, thunderous sound that shook the earth. However, the hail of bullets they rained down did not touch the witches whatsoever.

A giant tentacle split the sea and leaped forth, serving as their shield, blocking all of the bullets flying at them. The guardsmen were in shock at the bizarre sight.

The tentacle had a diameter of some hundred and fifty centimeters at its thickest point; they couldn’t even get a good look at how long it was. It was a translucent appendage suggestive of a cephalopod; a squid, perhaps. Moving like snakes, more tentacles entered the fray, completely concealing the witches behind them.

“You live in a Demon Sanctuary. Are you really surprised by a familiar of this level?” The scarlet witch made a haughty laugh as if to mock the troops that seemed ready to flee.

The black witch cruelly twisted her lips and shook her head.

“That is an unreasonable request, Octavia. It is a city in which that uncouth little girl dwells, after all.”

“True, my sister.”

The scarlet witch spread out the book she had been carrying under one arm. She pressed her palm onto the book. The symbols drawn upon it glowed, releasing an immense amount of magical energy.

“Then let them at least beautify this filthy city with their own blood.”

The tentacles moved with even greater force.

The guardsmen continued to fire, but naturally, even large-caliber rounds could not penetrate translucent tentacles over a full meter thick. The barrage ended when they ran out of ammunition.

That instant, the tentacles switched to the offensive.

The tentacles, extending like giant leathery whips, mowed the guardsmen down one after another.

Shields were meaningless against such an overwhelming difference in mass. The stout troops were tossed aside like bowling pins; the formation enveloping the witches completely fell apart.

“What the hell are they—?!” the squad leader angrily shouted.

They were Demon Sanctuary guardsmen with heavy combat experience. No familiar controlled by a magic user had ever chewed them up and spat them out like this.

However, these tentacles were on a different level. Such a mighty familiar was well beyond the summoning capacity of an ordinary human being. This was a monster that rivaled even vampiric Beast Vassals. Surely the life force consumption required to summon a monster on this scale would instantly burn out anything *but* an immortal vampire.

In the recent past, there had apparently been experiments to graft a Beast Vassal to a homunculus, but even their bodies, with natural life spans far in excess of a human’s, were exhausted in but a short time.

No—there was one way and only one. A shortcut that one could call an exception.

It was a way for someone to gain enormous demonic power rivaling that of a vampire, even while remaining in human form.

A devil could grant such a person power in exchange for her very soul. In other words, a witch—

An operator from Island Guard HQ sent an emergency message straight to the squad leader’s earphone.

“Spell rune has been cross-referenced using the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s criminal data bank. High probability these are the top-rank criminal sorceresses ‘the Meyer Sisters’ assigned to LCO’s First Branch, ‘Philosophy.’”

The squad leader’s voice shook with despair.

“The Meyer Sisters?! The Ashdown Witches?!”

The Meyer Sisters were international sorcery criminals who had conducted a

dangerous magical ritual in the imperial state of Ashdown of the North Sea, and the ensuing disaster had wiped out an entire provincial capital.

These same sisters had appeared at Itogami Island some ten years prior, inflicting severe, unprecedented damage.

If those witch sisters had appeared once more, the weapons of the Interdiction Unit were nowhere near enough to deal with them.

“Quite correct. It seems you do remember us still.”

“Marvelous. Here is your reward.”

Looking over the shocked guardsmen, the black witch raised her own book to the sky. The ground at the troops’ feet split open; a malignant miasma rose through the crack.

Snapping back to his senses, the squad leader tried to order his men to fall back. But it was already too late. A new tentacle emerged from the split in the ground’s surface, ripping apart the artificial island’s steel foundation and dragging the guardsmen toward the bottom of the dark sea.

When the overwhelming onslaught concluded, a strange silence came over the cliff-side road.

All that remained on the surface of the ground were two witches, one scarlet and one black.

The scarlet witch murmured in a bored tone as she put her book back under her cloak. “A pathetic bunch. If they were all we faced, we wouldn’t need help from the Library at all.”

The black witch nodded.

“Quite so, Octavia.”

Lifting the rim of her triangular hat, she glared at the night skyline of Itogami City.

“But do not forget. Natsuki is in this city…that abominable Witch of the Void!”

Leaving a wet *plop* behind, the giant tentacles returned to the sea.

The two witches melted into the darkness once more, leaving nothing behind

save the evidence of their senseless destruction.

Midnight had passed. It was a new day.

One more day remained until the wild, blood-drenched banquet was set to begin—

Chapter Two
My Dear Childhood Friend

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My Dear Childhood Friend

1

Itogami Island's central airport was completely jammed with travelers.

On this day, the Friday of the last week of October, they were heading to festivities the night before the Hollow Eve Festival itself. There were numerous events scheduled to begin in the evening, resulting in the first real flood of tourists from off the island.

The road connecting the airport to the monorail station was heavily congested, completely taken over by people dragging their luggage along. Kojou and the others wedged themselves through the crowd, somehow finally arriving at the airport terminal.

Kojou raggedly exhaled as he looked up at the time on the electronic billboard.

"Looks like we made it in time…?"

The time was already past a quarter after nine in the morning. However, there was still no sight of the person he was meeting. From the looks of it, he might have been in the crowd around luggage pickup; maybe quarantine and customs inspection was taking a while.

Nagisa was fuming in anger.

"Well, it's your fault! You took so long getting ready that we had to work up a sweat, too. And I picked up such awesome clothes! Why'd you have to sleep in on a day like this? I can't believe it, it's just unreal."

It figured—however heavily her shoulders heaved, her word output did not diminish in any way.

“Sorry already! Thanks to the fuss last night I was wide awake and couldn’t sleep!”

“You were worked up from remembering Kanon visiting your room, weren’t you? It’s so embarrassing!”

“U…gh…!”

Kojou was at a loss for words as Nagisa hit the mark. Kojou didn’t have the nerves of steel it would’ve taken to sleep soundly after getting stimulated so much that his urge to drink blood had kicked in.

Kanon bowed her head, feeling responsible for some reason. “I’m so sorry, Akatsuki. It’s my fault.”

Today, she was wearing a plain and simple gray cotton dress. But the plain outfit only served to emphasize Kanon’s extravagant silver hair even more, bathing her in attention from the people at the airport.

“Nah, don’t worry about it, not your fault, Kanase.”

It was Yukina who spoke with a tone that had a conflicted twinge to it, giving voice to Kanon’s feelings. “…But I wonder if we really should have come, too? I hope it’s not a bother…” Yukina was wearing a one-piece polo outfit with knee-high socks. Of course, the guitar case was over her back, as always. For that reason, she looked like a member of some kind of band.

Actually, most of Yukina’s personal clothes had been picked out and sent over by Sayaka. Kojou couldn’t help but imagine Sayaka getting chills while picking them out, but he wasn’t surprised her choices suited Yukina very nicely.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. This is your first Hollow Eve Festival, too, Yukina. It’s more fun if you come around with all of us. It doesn’t take any more time to show one person around than it does three. Right, Kojou?”

Nagisa wrapped her arms around her friends’ shoulders without restraint as she spoke in a cheerful tone.

Kojou made a generous shrug of his shoulders.

“I’ve got no complaints about you keeping Nagisa company. Yuuma said it was fine, too.”

Nagisa added a “yeah,” nodding without hesitation.

“Yuuma was happy we’re bringing friends along. Yuu’s been nice to girls since waaaay back.”

“Yeah.”

Kojou made a light sigh as he kept pace with Nagisa’s comments.

Kanon was Nagisa’s friend to begin with. There was nothing for Kojou to find wrong with their hanging out anyway. Besides, if he’d let Yukina be, she’d tail him for sure, saying it was part of her watcher duties. In that case, it was more relaxing to have her where he could see her. No, Kojou had another reason for sighing.

“…So, what are you two doing here?”

Kojou whirled his head toward a boy and girl watching him from the shadow of a pillar. One was a schoolgirl with an extravagant hairstyle; the other was a young, short-haired man with headphones hanging around his neck. Both had very showy carnival masks over their faces. Maybe they’d meant those to be disguises; at any rate, they stood out so much that it had the opposite effect.

Realizing her identity had been exposed, Asagi reluctantly took off her mask.

“…You have done well to see through our perfect disguises.”

Kojou was too flabbergasted to even think about laughing. “You call *those* perfect? They’re way too obvious. Where’d you get that mask, anyway?”

Yaze proudly puffed out his chest as he stroked the lifelike peacock feathers of his mask. “Oh, just one of those places selling stuff for the costume parade.”

“So what, you’re bored stiff so you came over here?”

“Geez, what’s wrong with that? We just wanted to get a look at your friend’s face. We’re heading home after that.”

“Yeah,” added Asagi. “We wanna see what your childhood friend looks like, Kojou. Just think of it like we’re just passing through.”

“I could’ve just introduced you,” Kojou replied. “You didn’t have to hide and watch like that.”

Kojou recalled that both Yaze and Asagi had been present when the rendezvous had come up in conversation. Perhaps they were both displaying an unexpected amount of consideration, thinking that they didn't want to intrude on his reunion with his old friend. He shook his head in exasperation at how they must've thought he'd cruelly brush them off. Then—

Without warning, someone called out to Kojou from above their heads in a very loud voice.

"…Kojou!"

It was a rich alto voice that carried across the packed terminal with impressive clarity.

As the voice hit him, Kojou reflexively looked up to see a human silhouette descending upon him. Someone had slid down the stair rail and leaped right in front of Kojou's eyes.

It was a girl with a very excitable air about her.

Her hair was in a short bob with the ends curled up. She wore a sports brand hoodie over her torso. Her long, curvy legs extended beyond her short pants. Her slender calves and rugged basketball shoes made for an oddly cute pair.

"Whoa?!" exclaimed Kojou.

Kojou somehow managed to catch the girl, right in front of Asagi and the others' shocked eyes. As a result, the two were in a tight embrace as Kojou gave the girl a dumbfounded look.

"Y-Yuuma?!"

"Heya. Long time no see, Kojou."

The girl called Yuuma narrowed her eyes as she made a mischievous smile. Her smiling face was off-the-charts adorable in a very boyish way. Kojou put her down with an annoyed look.

"…You almost made my heart stop there. You're just totally reckless, you know that?"

The girl laughed eloquently, looking around the area. She seemed to finally notice that her antics had drawn the attention of the entire lobby upon them.

She stuck her tongue out a bit as if slightly put off, looking at Kojou. Kojou was about to let out a very deep sigh when Nagisa stepped between them, as if to keep him from doing so.

“Yuu!”

“Nagisa, you’ve grown so beautiful. I didn’t recognize you.”

“Oh, there you go again…! I sent you a picture practically yesterday.”

“No, no. The real thing puts the picture to shame.”

You’d think that line was sweet enough to make your teeth rot, but it was oddly persuasive when coming out of a girl’s mouth.

Asagi gazed dumbfounded at the Akatsuki siblings’ conversation with the mystery girl as Yukina, standing beside her, grabbed her shoulders and strongly shook her.

“What’s this? What’s going on here?!”

For once, Yukina sounded completely baffled. “D-don’t ask me, I have no idea…”

The watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor had no idea whatsoever how the meeting with the boy he’d apparently been friends with back in elementary school had morphed into an intimate conversation with a beautiful girl.

Finally regaining her senses, Asagi forced her way to Kojou and asked, “Hey, Kojou. What’s the meaning of this?”

Kojou seemed at a loss as he looked at his friend, who looked much more bloodthirsty since he’d last checked. “Of what?”

“Who is this person?”

Yukina circled around Kojou’s back as she asked. Strangely, she and Asagi seemed like comrades in arms. Kojou, the pincer movement having cut off all avenues of escape, uncomfortably shrugged his shoulders.

“My childhood friend. Duh.”

Yukina and Asagi interjected at nearly the same time.

“This is a girl, though?”

“And a really good-looking one?!”

Kojou looked even more bewildered.

“…What are you guys worked up for? You saw the picture back at my place last night.”

“Oh yeah, you never actually said you were meeting up with a guy,” Yaze calmly pointed out.

“Muu,” went Asagi and Yukina, biting their lips in silence.

Now that he mentioned it, sure, when Kojou said he was meeting an old friend, they naturally thought he meant a guy, but neither sibling had ever actually said so. Indeed, thinking back to the picture they’d seen, the person seemed too pretty to be an actual boy.

Plus, the vestiges of the person in the picture were evident on the face of the mystery girl Nagisa was happily speaking with. So, they were indeed one and the same. QED.

“—So they’re friends from your school, Kojou?”

The mystery girl approached Asagi and the others, who had not recovered from the shell shock of which she was the cause, and made a very warm smile at them. She wasn’t much taller than Asagi, but her tight frame without a single bit of excess flesh created a near-perfect body shape, which seemed blatantly unfair.

Plus, she had that radiant, smiling face. If she wanted, she could probably make anyone young or old, of either gender, swoon for her.

But perhaps because it was old news to him, her smiling face didn’t even make Kojou bat an eyebrow.

“Yeah, these girls here are Nagisa’s classmates,” Kojou explained.

Kanon and Yukina introduced themselves in that order. After that, Kojou pointed at Asagi and Yaze.

“—And these two are just passing through.”

“Who’s just passing through?!” Asagi angrily replied on pure reflex.

Kojou scowled with a look of dismay. “You’re the one who told me to think of you like that!”

Watching the exchange between Asagi and Kojou with amusement, the girl made a textbook formal bow.

“Ha-ha-ha, thank you for taking such good care of Kojou for me. Yuuma Tokoyogi. A pleasure to meet you.”

2

Kojou and the others ditched the lethal crowds at the monorail and took a bus to Keystone Gate.

It was the biggest building in Itogami City and the facility used to administer the entire island, but at the same time, it was the site of the island’s No. 1 collection of top-brand stores, making it stellar for killing time.

It also came with a library for visitors to the Demon Sanctuary and souvenir shops, so it was common sense for natives giving tourists a tour of Itogami Island to start there.

After giving the library a once-over, Kojou’s party entered a small cafeteria Yaze had recommended. The interior seemed a little retro, but the place had a pretty nice feel to it.

Since there weren’t any tables for four available, the three middle school students and high schoolers split up and sat separately. High schoolers Asagi and Yaze formed one group and Kojou and Yuuma formed another. Kojou and Yuuma had gone to pick up the meals, automatically relegating Asagi and Yaze to remain in their seats, looking out for everyone’s things.

Yaze made a sarcastic smile as he watched Asagi exercise bad manners, sipping on her glass of ginger ale through a straw.

“…You don’t look all that enthused.”

Yaze tossed Asagi a sarcastic smile as he watched her ignore good manners as she blew bubbles into her glass of ginger ale.

“You look like you’re having plenty of fun.”

Yaze nodded a firm *Yeah!* “Not exactly as nice as my senior year girl, but this Yuuma chick’s not bad looking, especially those legs and hips. She looks slender, but her chest is actually pretty nice.”

Yaze had his arms crossed as he made an earnest comparison.

Asagi still couldn’t quite believe it, but this guy actually did have a girlfriend. Furthermore, she was two years his senior, a third-year high school girl. She was considered a bit eccentric but was a cute girl who wore glasses.

Thanks to his real-world exploits, Yaze ended up giving Asagi high-handed advice from time to time, something that irritated her to no end.

“I see what’s got your goat here,” Yaze continued. “Who’d have thought Kojou had a jewel like this hidden away somewhere? Well, it looks like that moron Kojou has no idea what kind of advantage he has here.”

Asagi casually poured on the scorn, not denying the fact it had her goat.

“That moron’s head stopped developing back in elementary school.”

Sometime during all this, the Yuuma in question was coming back carrying a tray covered in food. It was a straightforward order with hot dogs, onion rings, and the like.

“Here you go. I tried to order something appropriate, but this should be all right?”

Faced with that invigorating, smiling face, Asagi blushed in spite of herself.

“Ah, er…thank you.”

Truth be told, she was the type Asagi had a hard time with even without Kojou being involved, but it was difficult to hate Yuuma when she was giving you that friendly, smiling face.

Looking down at Asagi’s feet, resting lazily under the table, Yuuma made a pleasant smile mixed with a rise of her brows.

“Those sandals.”

“Huh?”

“Engel limited edition colors, right? From that magazine collaboration thingy.”

“That’s right… You really know your stuff.”

“They’re cute. They look really good on you.”

“Th-thank you.”

Asagi couldn’t help but smile broadly. She’d had a secret love of the sandals she was wearing that day and finally got a pair as a reward after applying with fifty handwritten postcards. It wasn’t something she’d brag to other people about, but of course she was glad that someone out there recognized their value.

Yaze seemed to enjoy cutting in as his sharp eyes picked up Asagi’s broad grin.

“What are you blushing for, Asagi?”

Asagi raised her eyebrows.

“Sh-shut up. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Hmm, are they really that big a deal?”

Noticing Kojou staring at the bare tops of her feet, Asagi rudely kicked him away.

“Don’t look, you!”

Yuuma giggled as she watched the interaction between the three of them. “This is good stuff.” Her words, coming as she brought soup to her lips, brought a merry “Nice!” out of Yaze.

“You’ve got pretty good taste to appreciate this place, Tokoyogi. This is a place known only to a select few, even on Itogami Island. This is just between us, but I hear they use Demon Sanctuary research feedback for the special ingredients.

“In other words, rumor has it they use demon food testers with taste buds more sensitive than humans to pick out their stuff.”

Yuuma spoke with visible admiration as she scooped up some soup and offered it in front of Yaze.

“This’s really something. How about you try some, too, Yaze?”

It was a classic *say aaahh* pose. For a moment, Yaze stopped out of apparent shock; then he thrust his face forward, his cheeks red all the while. His motion was made awkward by his uncharacteristic nervousness.

For some reason, Yaze's compliment was actually polite. "Th-this is delicious."

Yuuma made a happy-looking nod. "Isn't it? I'm so glad."

"…What are you blushing for?" Asagi asked with an amazed look as she watched Yaze flustered by Yuuma's jubilance.

Yaze clutched his head in visible anguish.

"I-I'm not. It's a misunderstanding. My heart's already set on another wo— Yikes?!"

Yaze let out a short yelp as his cell phone rang right then with perfect timing. Judging from the twitch of his face, one might think it was a call from the girlfriend in question.

In contrast to Yaze being thoroughly shaken, Yuuma's behavior was calm and collected. To her, this sort of thing was just normal communication between friends. Kojou, for his part, calmly continued eating, quite familiar with Yuuma's personality.

I see, Asagi thought, accepting something in a roundabout way. No doubt this combined with Kojou's quite dense personality had shaped his view of how girls expressed goodwill. It was even possible he'd dismiss her having kissed him as normal communication, too.

Having said that, she felt having had a girl like Yuuma around him since he was little meant he couldn't help it. Glancing sideways, Asagi made a hearty sigh as Yuuma continued merrily eating like some sort of oblivious gigolo.

"…It's just not fair."

"What are you talking about?" Kojou asked.

"Nothing at all. Just that a friend like that's wasted on you, Kojou."

"That so…?" Kojou's lips twisted as he replied, looking a tad wounded.

"I'll have you know she's had some pretty big blunders too. I mean back during

our fifth-grade camping trip—”

Yuuma threatened Kojou with a very calm look on her face.

“You sure about that, Kojou? If you divulge that information, I’ll tell them *that* story about you, you know.”

Kojou swiftly submitted. “I’m very sorry, please forgive me.”

Asagi resumed blowing bubbles into the bottom of her glass as she watched Kojou and Yuuma engaged in a comedy routine.

She hated to admit it, but there was no doubt Yuuma was a very charming girl. Hard as that was, there was no atmosphere of intimacy between her and Kojou at all. At the very least, Kojou treated her completely the same as any guy friend.

It wasn’t so much that Kojou was dense as he was treating her like any old friend. When Asagi thought about it more, it was a lot like her relationship with Motoki Yaze.

Something tugged at her nonetheless. It was vague, based on intuition.

It was the same as the ill feeling she had when seeing bugs’ guts on a serious program. Nothing constituted concrete evidence, but Asagi absolutely did not ignore her malaise, for experience had taught her that it was linked to grievous danger. *I see*, Asagi realized. *I just don’t like this Yuuma Tokoyogi girl.*

Asagi was still indulging in such insecure thoughts when Yaze came back from taking the cell call outside the shop.

“You’re serious… Understood. I’ll be back shortly.”

Saying those last words with an unusually grave look on his face, Yaze brusquely hung up the call.

“Yaze? What’s wrong?” Asagi inquired.

“Ahh, sorry. Something’s come up. I’ve gotta be on my way.”

Yaze immediately returned to his usual carefree tone, but the crease between his eyebrows did not vanish. Whatever was happening was apparently no minor emergency.

“What? Your girlfriend yanking your chain?”

“Something like that. See ya!”

Yaze rushed out of the store, his favorite headphones in tow. Kojou had French fries in his mouth when he did a double take while watching him go.

“Hey, you! Pay for what you ate, will ya?!” Kojou bellowed.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Don’t *mwa-ha-ha* me!!”

The other guests in the restaurant were flabbergasted as they saw Yaze leave, loud laughter trailing behind him.

Asagi murmured, “Oh, for goodness’ sake,” as her eyes met Yuuma’s, who was sitting opposite her. Seeing the girl send an invigorating, charming smile back at her, Asagi repeated the same line once more in her own heart. *Oh for goodness’ sake.*

The next moment, Asagi tilted her head as she felt the smartphone in her pouch vibrate.

“Ah…?”

This was the smartphone Asagi used as her personal work tool. She’d obtained it through the black market with all kinds of illegal modifications included; no one should have had that cell phone’s number.

“Sorry, I have to take this.”

Asagi made a frivolous wave to Kojou and Yuuma as she stood up. No “human” should have known the phone’s number. In other words, the caller wasn’t human at all.

Pressing the ACCEPT button, Asagi heard a composite, artificial voice flow out of the smartphone.

“—Miss? Sorry to interrupt you on your day off.”

“What is it, Mogwai? If it’s business, can it wait till later?”

Asagi grilled the AI, her partner, with obvious displeasure. Mogwai was the Ghost of Itogami Island—the avatar of the five supercomputers that held all of Itogami Island’s urban functionality in its paws.

It boasted operational abilities on par with the world's finest, but it was equally quirky and hard to handle, leading to a poor reputation—but for some reason, Asagi had grown fond of it.

The AI purposefully using a low-fidelity audio transmission meant that the call had a nontrivial level of scrambling in the background.

Mogwai laid things out as if to back up Asagi's assumptions.

"Sorry, we don't have the time to spare. It's an emergency. A Class III Defense Condition has been instituted."

"Huh? What the heck is this sort of large-scale terrorism?!" Asagi asked back in astonishment. She'd expected there was some kind of trouble happening, but she never expected Class III. The Demon Sanctuary had seven defense conditions, and this was third from the top. It indicated that there was grievous damage to Itogami City's urban functionality, with a risk of serious loss of human life.

There'd only been one Class III invoked since Asagi had begun working part-time for the Management Corporation—when the Lotharingian Armed Apostle had assaulted Keystone Gate.

At the time, the Island Guard had over a hundred wounded guardsmen. In other words, Itogami Island now faced a peril of equal stature.

"So anyway, the Management Corpration's sent you an emergency work order. Please and thank you, miss."

Mogwai's arbitrary request came without any proper explanation of the circumstances. That only made the gravity of the issue more apparent. Even if she was a genius-level hacker, she was still just a student working part-time, yet they were putting this rather excessive weight on her shoulders. She couldn't just ignore it and walk away.

"Sheesh…all right already. Just hold on, I'm on my way. What's the big deal, geez."

Conveying her acceptance in a frail tone of voice, Asagi hung up the call. It seemed some kind of lethal situation had quietly developed while her back had been turned.

3

They transferred to the twelfth story aboveground by elevator and headed to a viewing tower above even that.

It was smack in the middle of Itogami Island, the viewing hall of Keystone Gate's top section—

It was the highest place on the island, possessing a perfect, unobstructed view.

Nagisa made a high-pitched shout of admiration as she rushed out onto the glass floor without the slightest timidity.

"Whoa, the view is incredible!"

It was a donut-shaped room about ten meters in diameter. The walls and floor were all made out of glass, allowing one to look over virtually the entirety of Itogami City from within. Another selling point of the place was that the entire floor gently rotated, so you could take in a 360-degree view just by standing still.

"It's my first time in the viewing hall. I've always wanted to come up here. It's a lot higher than I thought. Whoa, a souvenir medal dispenser! Key holders, too!"

In complete contrast to his little sister's childlike high spirits, Kojou's expression was full of gloom from having paid everyone's entrance fee. "So expensive… Who'd've guessed a little elevator ride could get you ripped off for so much?"

Even if it was the tallest place on the whole island, the fee for just going to the roof—a thousand yen per head—was hard on a high schooler's wallet just to play tourist. But the hall was even more packed than he'd expected. It really was a must-see stop on any tour of Itogami Island.

Yukina walked onto the floor very gently as if testing its strength. Kojou wanted to laugh as he watched her carefully avoid the glass panels and walk on top of the metal pillars.

"It's a little scary. It's like you're floating in space."

Kojou spoke when he noticed her hand absolutely refused to pull away from the rail.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re bad with airplanes and stuff, Himeragi.”

To Yukina, who found all types of machines to be awkward, an airplane must have seemed to be a mysterious mass of steel that flew through the air. She probably had a similar feeling where the rotating viewing hall was concerned.

But because of her pride as a watcher, she didn’t seem to want to let Kojou know she was afraid.

“That is incorrect. I am just concerned about the strength of the glass with so many people standing on it. It does not mean I am frightened whatsoever.”

“Right, right.” Kojou let Yukina’s bluffing roll past him like water off a duck as he offered her his hand. “Here.”

Yukina was at a bit of a loss.

“Th-thank you very much,” she said, taking Kojou’s hand. She seemed to be a bit calmer as they walked alongside Kanon, with both their eyes glittering as they began looking through the binoculars that lined the walls.

Kojou felt like a teacher chaperoning elementary schoolers as he watched the girls when Yuuma got close to him and jabbed an elbow into his ribs.

“Pretty girl you got there. She your girlfriend, Kojou?”

“Hah?”

With a suspicious look, Kojou glanced back at the wide grin coming over Yuuma as he shook his head. *No, no, no…*

“I told you, that’s Nagisa’s classmate.”

“You look like you get along *really* well…”

“R-right… She just happens to live in the apartment beside us. Total coincidence.”

Of course, Kojou couldn’t tell her the truth—that he was a vampire and she was always keeping an eye on him—so he spun a tense excuse. Yuuma made a strained smile, not in doubt of him but finding added meaning in his words.

“Hmm. Coincidence, huh?”

“What?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking that you haven’t changed any.”

“That ain’t so.”

Kojou sighed at his own expense as Yuuma’s casual words made him really feel the sarcastic whims of destiny.

It’d been four years since he last met her. Things had been extremely stormy during that time. First there was Nagisa’s incident where she was on death’s door, their parents divorced, and Kojou himself had obtained the absurd physical characteristics of the Fourth Primogenitor. He thought of the opportunity to reunite with an old friend like this as a miraculous piece of good fortune.

“I’m relieved you haven’t changed any yourself, Yuuma.”

Kojou said it in a fervent tone, but this time it was Yuuma’s turn to slump her shoulders in letdown.

“…Well that hurts. I’ve been trying to act a lot more feminine.”

Hearing Yuuma murmur in a voice almost too soft to hear, Kojou had a mystified look on him as he glanced back.

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing. Anyway, what an awesome view. So this is the city you live in, Kojou.”

Yuuma spoke as she pressed her forehead to the glass window like a little girl.

Below her eyes, she could see the tightly packed quarters of Itogami City. Beyond, the deep blue sea continued all the way to the horizon. It was a first for Kojou’s eyes, too. The island looked all alone in the world.

Kojou mumbled while squinting from the dazzling rays reflecting off the water’s surface.

“It’s a small island any way you slice it, huh?”

Yuuma shook her head, making her hair swish and flutter.

“It’s interesting, though. It’s like the whole island’s one big theme park. It really is a Demon Sanctuary.”

“It’s usually a lot plainer than this. This is ’cause it’s right before a festival.”

“Right before a festival…truly it is.”

Yuuma made a little mumble and smiled pleasantly. An airplane circling around the city’s airspace to announce the events for that night’s festivities was passing at that exact moment. The festival was finally set to begin in earnest.

Kojou absentmindedly gazed at the teenage girl–idol group depicted on the plane’s fuselage when the cell phone in his parka’s pocket began to ring.

Kojou moved away from Yuuma and took the phone out of his pocket; his eyebrows scowled when he saw the name displayed on the LCD. The caller seemed vaguely like an ill omen.

“…Kirasaka, huh? Rare for you to call at a time like this. I’m kinda in the middle of something right now…”

Kojou’s face grimaced as he said so to her. Sayaka Kirasaka was an Attack Mage from the Lion King Agency, just like Yukina. Kojou had met her in the middle of a large-scale terrorist incident in Itogami City just the month before.

For some reason, she’d been calling Kojou quite often since then. Since Yukina didn’t have a cell phone, she seemed to be calling so that she could ask how Yukina was doing and nothing specifically to do with him. Sayaka was Yukina’s former roommate and fawned over the girl like some overprotective big sister even now.

Kojou meant to dismiss it by saying she was just calling about Yukina again, but unexpectedly, the voice he heard through the phone’s speaker was not Sayaka’s at all.

“Tee-hee-hee. It is I.”

“Huh?” Kojou raised his voice, caught completely by surprise. “That voice… La Folia, huh? That phone has Sayaka’s number though?”

“I saw this number in Sayaka’s address book under ‘Favorites,’ so I thought I’d give it a try… Ah, what are you trying to do, Sayaka?”

“—I-is this Kojou Akatsuki?”

It sounded like the phone had been snatched away as the call switched to Sayaka’s heavily flustered voice.

“Now don’t misunderstand me here, this phone has an unfortunate feature requiring saved numbers to be put under ‘Favorites.’ That’s all it is!!”

“Sounds like an annoying feature, yeah.”

Kojou grimaced as he mumbled back. This was Sayaka talking, an expert in curses and assassination, so it didn’t sound like a joke.

“So what are you calling for, anyway? Wasn’t Her Highness going back to her own country?”

“That was the plan, but the circumstances have changed. She couldn’t get on the plane.”

“Did you get lost or something?”

Kojou was beside himself as he asked. Her Highness was La Folia Rihavein, crown princess of the kingdom of Aldegia. Last he could recall, Sayaka had been assigned to protect her during her unofficial visit.

He’d heard the Japanese government had arranged a special charter for the princess and that she was scheduled to fly home early that morning.

However, Kojou didn’t think the two remaining together even now was the result of the princess’s whims or some mistake of Sayaka’s.

Sayaka’s halting reply was in a somber tone of voice.

“I can’t…say that’s far off the mark, but…I’ll just lay out the facts. When we thought we were boarding the charter plane, we were at the sub-float that’s under construction.”

Kojou just couldn’t wrap his mind around it. Things often went off the rails when he was talking with Sayaka, but it was particularly bad this time around. “… Sorry, I don’t get what you’re saying at all. Wait, you mean the sub-float that the Nalakuvera trashed not long ago? That’s like, the opposite side of the island.”

Sayaka shouted back, plainly irked. *“Well, we don’t know what happened, either! Anyway, that’s the situation.”*

Kojou felt like he vaguely understood. “…So what can I do?”

He knew they were wrapped up in some kind of trouble, but he didn’t think

he'd be of any help to either of them. Sayaka, an Attack Mage, possessed abnormal combat capability of course, but so did the princess with the Völundr System that came with her spell gun. Your average demon or criminal had no hope against them. Even if Kojou ran over to protect them, he'd only be getting in their way.

However, a somewhat unexpected name rolled off the princess's lips.

"I want to ask you about Kanon."

Kanon Kanase was the daughter of the former and retired king of Aldegia. Kojou recalled that, legally speaking, she was La Folia's aunt, but in reality she was more like her little sister.

Kojou looked at Kanon, timidly gaping wide-eyed down at the ground, as he spoke.

"Well, Kanase's here right now."

"Whaaat?" went Sayaka in an angry, shrill voice.

"What is she doing with you*? Don't tell me this time you're putting your hands on her…?!"*

"I am not!! Relax, Himeragi's here, too."

"What is that, pride?! Is that pride I'm hearing?! Not that I'm jealous at all here!!" Sayaka was worked up and ranting rather incoherently when the princess pulled the phone away and resumed.

"I cannot get in touch with the Aldegian knights I had called in to protect Kanon. I believe this incident has no relation to her, but could you please be careful?"

That he had no problem with. Kojou gave his answer in a firm voice to reassure the princess. "Got it. I look after Kanase and everything's fine, right?"

La Folia giggled in what sounded like a joking tone of voice. *"Please do. If you require a reward, you can drink a little of her you-know-what."*

"He can do no such thing!" Sayaka exclaimed.

Sayaka's shriek was the last thing he heard before the call disconnected.

Feeling tired for no good reason, Kojou put his phone away only to notice Yukina had been standing beside him since who-knew-when.

“That was Sayaka just now?” Yukina asked with a somewhat conflicted expression on her. For some reason, she didn’t seem all that enthused about the fact Sayaka was in touch with Kojou and not her.

Kojou had no idea why she wasn’t enthused, though. Surely she was well aware that Sayaka hated his guts. At best, she thought of him as someone to worry over.

“I don’t really get what’s going on, but she and La Folia are in some kind of trouble. They were getting on a plane when they wound up on the sub-float from a little back before they knew it and stuff.”

“…What does that mean?”

“Who knows. Didn’t seem like anyone was attacking them, though.”

It went without saying that the situation was abnormal, but both of them acted with considerable confidence. Letting them be didn’t seem like any kind of problem.

Yukina seemed to come to a similar conclusion as she nodded, her behavior calm.

“I believe those two will be all right, barring something exceptional.”

“Yeah. They were more worried about making sure Kanon was watched over than themselves.”

Hearing the details of the princess’s request seemed to give Yukina a good grasp of the circumstances. “I see,” she said, nodding with a very serious look as she watched Kanon over by the glass wall.

“Well, we can rest easy after handing Kanase back to Natsuki, right?” Kojou mused.

“I suppose so. We’ll be with her during the day, after all… We need simply escort her back to Ms. Minamiya’s residence in the evening.”

“That works.”

They'd settled on a policy for protecting Kanon without any need for prolonged discussion. It was not at all an exaggeration to say that there was no safer place on Itogami Island than the home of Natsuki Minamiya, a superb Attack Mage. All Kojou and Yukina had to do was bring Kanon to Natsuki and their duty was done.

Kojou realized it was best to call Natsuki first, but just as he began fishing his cell phone back out, he noticed a mild disturbance from the area near the elevator. The surrounding throng made it look like a famous person was making their way through; he could hear the shutters of cameras left and right as well.

"What's all that?"

"Who knows?"

Kojou and Yukina both tilted their heads a bit as they observed the tumult. Though nominally on their guard, the atmosphere did not suggest danger in any way, but…

"Ah, there you are! Kojou, come over here, quick!"

Nagisa appeared first, wedging herself through the curious onlookers and calling Kojou over, in a hurry for some reason. Behind Nagisa followed a young girl in a maid outfit looking very much out of place. She had indigo-colored hair and pale blue eyes; her visage looked inorganic, like a doll's. Noticing Kojou's and Yukina's presence, the homunculus girl murmured with a tone low on inflection, "Confirmed. Eyes on target."

Dumbfounded, Kojou called out the girl's name.

"A-Astarte?"

It was a homunculus in a maid outfit. To the tourists who'd come from far-flung places, there weren't many symbols of the Demon Sanctuary easier to grasp than this. It was natural their attention poured onto her.

Yuuma, who didn't know the circumstances, had a look of surprise as she asked Kojou the question that naturally came to mind.

"Is this what Demon Sanctuary maids are like, Kojou? That's really something. To think you know a homunculus maid…"

“Er, it’s not that being a maid is the girl’s day job but, um…” Kojou feebly attempted to defend Astarte’s honor. Her wearing an outfit like that was purely on the whim of Natsuki, her guardian for the time being…though she didn’t really seem to mind…

“What are you doing in a place like this, Astarte? Did Natsuki ask you to do something?” Kojou asked, reflexively on guard. He wondered if his violent homeroom teacher had sent a request for him to help with yet another dangerous job.

He didn’t find it unusual that Astarte knew right where to find Kojou and the others. Due to special circumstances, Kojou was supplying her with magical energy to preserve her life force. Apparently, Astarte could tell where Kojou was by tracing that magical energy channel back to him. It was entirely possible Natsuki would make use of Astarte’s nature and volunteer her to Kojou for messenger duty.

However, Astarte’s reply was decidedly not what he expected.

“Situational report: Regularly scheduled communication with the instructor has ceased as of nine o’clock AM of this morning.”

“…Communication’s ceased?” Kojou asked.

“Are you saying Ms. Minamiya has gone missing?” Yukina followed up.

Both Kojou and Yukina had considerable doubt on their faces. Astarte casually nodded.

“Affirmative. Transmitter and spell scroll signals have been lost.”

Unease spread through the center of Kojou’s chest bit by bit.

“Serious…?”

Even if she said Natsuki Minamiya was missing, it didn’t *feel* real. She was a bit too old to run away from home, and someone who lived as wantonly as Natsuki did surely wouldn’t go hide from the world. That said, he thought few people on the planet were capable of kidnapping her. Neither Kojou nor Yukina could beat her in a straight-up fight; he doubted even that combat maniac Dimitrie Vattler could pull that off—

But if Natsuki really was missing, it meant there was a menace arising on Itogami Island of a level that even she was not immune to.

Astarte spoke in a businesslike voice to the visibly rattled Kojou and Yukina.

“The instructor previously gave me directives in case of a circumstance such as this.”

“Directives?” Kojou wondered aloud.

“Kanon Kanase has been set as my primary target for protection.”

“Th-that so…?”

It seemed Natsuki really did take her duty as Kanon’s guardian seriously.

“—Wait, are you saying Natsuki knew she’d be gone in advance?” Kojou asked.

“Unclear. Unable to reply due to insufficient data.”

“…Figures. Sorry.”

Kojou apologized when he realized how Astarte felt. She didn’t show her emotions, but Astarte had to be just as uneasy about Natsuki’s disappearance as he was. Astarte stared at Kojou without a word. Perhaps he only imagined that he saw her eyes waver just a little.

Kojou spoke to himself, looking like he’d swallowed a bitter pill.

“I kinda…got a bad feeling about this…”

There was the abnormality Sayaka and La Folia had experienced; now Natsuki was missing. Putting Yaze aside, Asagi getting a sudden call from the Gigafloat Management Corporation tugged at him now.

He had a vague premonition that something was happening where Kojou and the others couldn’t see.

The saving grace was that no one was in any concrete danger as things stood.

Yukina had a serious look of concern as she spoke.

“I concur.”

Yuuma had an opaque expression as she glanced at the grave faces of Kojou and Yukina.

4

After making a light tour around the island, Kojou and the others returned to his apartment before sunset. They were taking a pass on night-before-the-festival events and heading to bed early that night. This was partly out of concern regarding Natsuki's disappearance, but at any rate, the Hollow Eve Festival only kicked up for real the next day.

Nagisa tapered her lips with a slightly desolate look as she sliced and diced cabbage in the kitchen.

"What a shame. Too bad Yukina and the others couldn't have supper with us, too."

As a result of their strategy session, Kanon and Astarte would be staying in Yukina's apartment overnight.

Yukina, whose Sword Shaman nature made her a specialist in hit-and-away tactics, couldn't call herself ideal for guard duty, but there was no mistaking that her combat ability was far above the norm nonetheless. With Astarte providing assistance, protecting Kanon probably wouldn't be that difficult even against rather powerful enemies.

The word was that the extra knights dispatched from the Aldegian homeland would arrive the next day; they could only hope that Natsuki would casually pop back into the picture before that time.

Kojou desperately pushed their excuse as he laid down on the living room sofa watching a Hollow Eve Festival TV special.

"They're probably being considerate for us. We wouldn't be able to have a relaxed conversation with Yuuma with a big crowd."

In spite of Nagisa's acute phobia of demons, she apparently wasn't all that concerned about Astarte, a homunculus. No doubt she also remembered how Astarte had risked her own life to protect Nagisa from terrorists.

However, with Natsuki gone missing and the possibility existing of someone going after Kanon, it was best to keep her as separate from unrelated people like Nagisa and Yuuma as possible—even if, in this case, "separate" meant Yukina's

residence, the next apartment over from Kojou and Nagisa's.

Nagisa seemed to accept Kojou's words as she gave her apron a flick and looked back.

"Riiight. You must be pretty worn out, too, Yuuma, with the long trip and all. Sorry I dragged you all over the place."

Yuuma made an energetic, pleasant smile as she sat cross-legged on top of the sofa.

"Nah, I had lots of fun. It was great being with friends of yours, too."

Nagisa puffed her chest out in a small measure of pride.

"They're all cute, aren't they? Ah, well not Yaze, but anyway, who do you like best?"

Even Yuuma had to make a strained smile at how Nagisa asked it like it was a normal question.

"You know, I am a girl and all. But let's see. Himeragi, maybe? She tugs at me a little."

"Mhmm," went Nagisa, nodding in agreement with her arms folded.

"Himeragi's cute, huh? She has her mess ups once in a while, but that's cute, too."

For a moment, a look came over Yuuma like she was staring off into space.

"…Plus, Kojou gives off the same scent as she does from time to time."

Nagisa glared at Kojou while clutching a kitchen knife.

"Huh?! What's that supposed to mean?"

Apparently she'd decided that when Yuuma said "the same scent," she meant it in a physical sense. Of course Kojou, knowing of no such thing, could only gape. Sure, he might have picked up some of her scent right after being pressed against Yukina in a packed monorail car, but that'd been the previous morning.

Yuuma hastily amended her explanation.

"No, I mean, the fact they go off and whisper stuff just between them from

time to time. I was thinking they get along real well."

"Ahh," went Nagisa, lowering the kitchen knife as she made a lively smile.

"I've been wondering about that since a while back myself. Yeah, the two of us are gonna interrogate Kojou tonight and get to the bottom of it!"

Yuuma seemed oddly eager as she nodded.

"Sounds good. That'll make it worth having come all this way."

"Gimme a break," said Kojou, covering his eyes as he turned his face to the ceiling.

"And Kojou," lectured Nagisa, "if you're not going to help with supper, get in the bath. I promised Yuuma we'd have ours together after."

"Got it—"

With Nagisa speaking to him like she was driving off a nuisance, Kojou languidly rose up from the couch, heading to the dressing room with his change of clothes. Kojou was thinking to himself that anything more than a shower was too much trouble.

Although he felt like it wasn't the time to be leisurely taking a bath with mysterious anomalies occurring so close to home, there really wasn't anything Kojou, a mere high school student as far as the world was concerned, could do here. Natsuki could have wrung some info out of the Island Guard, but her having gone missing took away that option.

He felt really bad for Yuuma after she'd come all that way, but if circumstances hadn't changed by the next day, it could prove better to stop being a festival tour guide and go search for Natsuki himself.

As Kojou thought about such things, he blithely took off his clothes and opened the bathroom door.

The door to the bathroom with snow-white steam floating in midair—

For a while, Kojou simply froze, unable to comprehend the sight spread before his eyes.

"Er…ah?"

There were already guests in the bath.

One was a homunculus girl with but the slightest hint of redness in her cheeks from the temperature, her slender, nude body floating in the water of the bathtub. And in front of the wash area's shower, a silver-haired girl was lathering up her shampoo.

Noticing that Kojou had entered the bathroom, both girls turned their heads toward him as one.

"Akatsuki…?"

"Intrusion of the Fourth Primogenitor confirmed."

Kojou looked all around in incomprehension.

"Kanase…and Astarte? Why…?!"

The situation was too bizarre for him to register surprise.

The layout of the bath was largely the same as in Kojou's apartment. However, the tub and faucet locations were mirror images.

Many apartment buildings used identical designs for neighboring apartments. Kojou didn't know the brands of the shampoo and body soap sitting on the table. However, they smelled the same as Yukina's hair.

Piecing together the available information, Kojou was reasonably certain that this was the bathroom of Yukina's apartment. He could therefore accept why Kanon and Astarte were here in the bath.

In other words, Kojou had apparently blundered into the washroom of Yukina's next-door apartment. *That's nuts*, thought Kojou. It was totally insane.

Even covered in shampoo, Kanon bowed her head in a polite and proper bow as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, we were in the bath first."

The whiteness of her skin was very apparent even with suds all around her, as if you could see right through them.

Kojou replied in a calm tone as well.

"R-right…take your time…"

It hurt how Astarte was looking at him with an expressionless gaze.

Kojou turned to his right and exited the lavatory, closing the door behind him.

That instant, cold sweat gushed over his entire body with great force, drenching him.

“…What was that just now?! What’s going on?!”

He looked around once more, seeing only the sights of the very familiar Akatsuki residence’s changing room. Kojou’s toothbrush was right on the washroom table right where he’d left it.

Just to be sure, he went out of the dressing room, but this was indeed Kojou and Nagisa’s apartment; Nagisa was in the kitchen preparing supper, and Yuuma was helping.

It was the exact same apartment in every way. The only things different were the expressions Nagisa and Yuuma wore.

Nagisa's face was beet red up to her ears while her cheek twitched.

"Kojou…what…are you doing?"

"Huh?"

Yuuma had a pained smile as she covered her eyes with a palm.

"That's…ah, a bit of a problem. It's still evening, and I'm not emotionally prepared for…"

Seeing their reactions, Kojou remembered the fact he wasn't wearing a single piece of clothing.

"Eh?! Ah…!!"

Here he was, calling out oddities and leaping out buck naked in front of his middle school–age little sister and his childhood friend, a teenage girl he hadn't seen for four years. That was Kojou's current situation. It was assuredly close to per— Well, no, it *was* perverted.

Kojou yelled out as he returned to the dressing room.

"U-uwaaaaaaaaa!"

The echoes of Nagisa's shriek and the breaking of the dishes she threw filled the air behind him.

5

Meanwhile, Asagi Aiba was still inside Keystone Gate. She was on the twelfth level below surface level.

This was the Gigafloat Management Corporation's security department.

It was an office built with a domed roof reminiscent of the cockpit of a passenger jet aircraft filled with innumerable active monitors, keyboards, trackballs, and other input devices, but the keyboards were layered vertically like those of a pipe organ. It was a room that gave you the eerie, oppressive sense of

being buried in machinery, but to Asagi, it was as comfortable as her very own home.

Displayed on the monitor in front of her was a color-coded 3-D display of the city and, off to the edges, numbers and formulas, their meaning unclear. They were analyses resulting from Asagi's diagnostic program.

Eating jelly in place of a more normal nighttime snack, Asagi was looking all of that over when she made a bitter face as the chat window she was using to communicate with the AI showed an unidentified user butting in.

The voice making itself welcome over the com audio was a throaty, electronically synthesized male voice.

"Well—! If it isn't Mogwai's lady and mistress!"

He was one of the freelance programmers in Asagi's circle of acquaintances; apparently he, too, had been invited to work part-time by the Gigafloat Management Corporation. His lowbrow speaking style rubbed her the wrong way, but he specialized at intercepting intruders—and he was very, very good at it. Put another way, he was like a bodyguard hired by private industry.

"Ugh, there he is again, that totally over-the-top guy," said Asagi, unintentionally airing her real opinion out loud.

But the other party made no sign of noticing as he made a hearty laugh.

"Ha-ha-ha. So the Gigafloat Management Corporation got even the 'Cyber Empress' to come running. Oh, this is lovely."

"—So you got called to duty, too, Charioteer?"

"Indeed. This uproar is quite a pleasant occasion. Surely you don't believe that tosh about this chaos being caused by a simple virus or GPS malfunction?"

"Not really," said Asagi, not disputing his reasoning at all. There was no point hiding anything from a hacker on her own level. "I really wonder what in the world it is, though."

"Mmm. Traffic lights all aflutter, car navigation system errors, instrument landing system inconveniences, a large number of missing children…there's no doubt something is interfering with the internal Gigafloat network systems,"

Charioteer murmured in an unexpectedly dead-serious tone of voice. As she expected, his info was dead-on.

The Gigafloat Management Corporation gathered detailed information from every corner of Itogami Island and used it to maintain the island's environment. This, of course, included water and electrical utilities, but also included controlling the mundane communication networks critical to private enterprise.

On an artificial island small in size with a heavily concentrated population, with most of its foodstuffs imported from off the island, any disruption to its communications network would have an instant effect on the lives of the island's residents.

That was why the Gigafloat Management Corporation managed a wide variety of information from sources such as monorail freight, road traffic, and even pedestrian footpaths and traffic lights, doing its utmost to maintain a harmonious transit system.

But since a half day or so earlier, that information network was experiencing numerous impediments.

Traffic lights and car navigation routes were leading to completely different places than their destinations; automated guidance systems for aircraft were losing the location of the island; and people continued to get lost, even in their own corporate office buildings.

The cause of the large-scale network obstruction was not yet known.

"The silver lining is that a lot of businesses are closed for the festival. If not for that, there'd probably be losses of one or two billion yen," said Charioteer.

"…Probably. And a lot of the people who are lost are tourists who don't know any better."

"Mmm." Seeing that Asagi agreed with him, Charioteer spoke in an emboldened voice. *"But it is quite fortuitous to have met you here. To be frank, it was getting to be too much with just me on the case. Have you considered some kind of cyber attack that's breached the Demon Sanctuary firewall?"*

Slumping back, slothfully burying her body into the back of her seat, Asagi spoke in languid tones. "About that… I wonder if this really is a cyber attack at

all.”

Charioteer made a low *mm* sound. *“It is quite odd. There are strange readings coming from various circuits and location information systems all across the island…”*

“But no one found anything wrong with the sensors or connection lines, or signs of viral contamination for that matter.”

As Asagi finished speaking, she switched her monitor display to the next diagnostic image.

From all the data displayed therein, that the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s network was currently operating normally was now a proven fact.

“So, how about this?” Asagi continued. “Nothing is obstructing the network. All of the readings displayed by the system are correct. So, the problem is on the city side of things.”

“Are you saying there’s a spatial distortion happening all around Itogami Island…?”

Charioteer fell into silence. Naturally, he’d suspected that such large-scale simultaneous disruptions had been caused by bugs in the programs themselves or cyber attacks from the outside. However, not even his abilities had located any trace of an intruder.

But if the obstructions were occurring in real space rather than the information network…would not the current anomalies be the natural, logical result given a normally operating network?

“Don’t tell me it’s not possible. This is a Demon Sanctuary we’re talking about here.”

Charioteer laughed loudly upon hearing Asagi’s words of sarcasm. *“That might well be the case. But spatial control rituals are a high-difficulty field of magic. Only very well-trained, high-quality magic users can do it, like big-time witches. You wouldn’t think that something affecting the entire island could be wielded by human hands.”*

“…I’m not sure what advantage bending space like this would bring someone,

anyway.”

Asagi tapered her lips in displeasure. She wasn’t going to wait for someone to prove her hypothesis to not be bothered by that loose end. Charioteer, too, made an anguished-sounding voice.

“Indeed. If all you wanted to do was damage Itogami City’s economy, it’d save a lot of time and trouble to just plant a bomb.”

Mogwai intruded into the conversation. “No… Hold on, miss. There should be a record of a similar spatial distortion having occurred some ten years ago in the Island Guard’s archives. It’s classified as top secret.”

“A sealed record from ten years ago…?”

Asagi went fishing in the archives according to her support AI’s advice. She hacked her way in, of course. It was a lot faster than asking for permission.

“What, the Black Bible Incident…?! The Witch of Notalia, then?!” Charioteer bellowed as he accessed the files the same way she had. Asagi was still a primary schooler when the so-called Black Bible Incident had shaken the entire Demon Sanctuary to the core some ten years prior, but she still remembered it.

“Hey, Mogwai…”

“Yeah?”

“Lately, have there been any signs of criminal organizations infiltrating Itogami Island?” Asagi posed the question to her partner in a quiet voice. Mogwai’s reply was quick.

“…Oh yeah, LCO operatives broke through the outer defenses. I’m pretty sure the Island Guard types are still after ’em?”

“Oh-ho…the Library, they’re quite a handful, too.” Charioteer spoke with a tone of excitement. The Library of Criminal Organizations, abbreviated LCO, also known as the Library… It was the name of a criminal organization known worldwide. It was said they, too, had played a pivotal role in the Black Bible Incident.

“I see… So that’s how it is…” Even Asagi could not hide her nervousness when her worst premonition turned out to be on target. Operatives of LCO had

invaded; anomalies were occurring all over Itogami Island. The chances that the two issues were unrelated struck her as slim.

And the next day would be the opening of the Hollow Eve Festival. There'd be a large number of tourists from off the island; it was the time when the Demon Sanctuary's security was most brittle.

"Mogwai, contact the Gigafloat Management Corporation. There's probably something *big* coming down the pipe tomorrow."

Her words would prove truer than she could ever imagine.

6

Kojou was in a full kneeling bow on the cold, hard floor. The entrance was the same as the Akatsuki residence, but this room was far emptier with few furnishings. It was the living room of Yukina's apartment.

Sitting across the prostrate Kojou and looking down at him was Yukina, sitting on her knees in proper Japanese style.

Beside her were Kanon and Astarte, their hair still wet from bathing.

Yukina reviewed the situation in a strangely calm voice.

"So, I'm not sure I have this all quite right but…my understanding is that you came to confess to having peeped on Kanase and Astarte in the bath?"

Kojou looked up in great haste. "I didn't! I mean, I did, but that's not the biggest problem here at all!"

It was quite true he'd entered the bathroom while Kanon and Astarte were in the bath, but there was surely something more important than that to talk about. Namely, that the Akatsuki residence's dressing room was connected to the washroom of the Himeragi residence next door. It may have seemed a small thing compared to the problem of Natsuki's disappearance, but this was certainly an anomaly.

"But you did look, didn't you?" Yukina stared straight at Kojou as she asked him.

For some reason, the all-too-quiet tone of her voice made Kojou sense impending doom as he fiercely shook his head.

“A-Astarte was under the water, and Kanase had shampoo suds all over her body so I didn’t see a—”

“But you did look, didn’t you?”

Kojou once again touched his forehead to the floor.

“…I’m very sorry.”

“You truly are hopeless…” Yukina remarked as she sighed at length.

For her part, being apologized to made Kanon’s face go bright red.

“I-it is nothing.”

Kojou immediately refuted Kanon’s meek statement. “No, it’s, um, kind of a big deal actually…”

This was, after all, a fully fledged princess; even setting that aside, Kanon had exceptionally good looks for a middle school student. Even if it was for but a single moment, the precious image of the momentary sight of her naked body was burned into the back of Kojou’s mind.

Yukina seemed to see right through Kojou as he subconsciously recalled that image from his memory, impaling him with her chilly gaze.

As if to drive him further into a corner, Astarte spoke in her usual unconcerned tone.

“Apology confirmed. Furthermore, I recall witnessing the Fourth Primogenitor in a virtually identical circumstance.”

Kojou quickly lost his nerve as she dragged that largely forgotten fact to the forefront.

“That wasn’t my fault!! I didn’t make you come out of that tuning vat like that…!”

Certainly, Kojou had encountered Astarte in a nearly nude state, but her body was being retuned by the Lotharingian Armed Apostle at the time; if anything, Kojou and Yukina had been her enemies.

However, upon hearing Astarte's statement Kanon's cheeks turned even redder.

"I have also been seen by Akatsuki before…so this much is all right, really…"

Kojou desperately professed his innocence.

"You were an angel at the time!! That was a complete act of God!"

Yukina shook her head in exasperation as she watched Kojou protest.

"At any rate, senpai, you tried to go into the washroom of your own residence and ended up in the washroom of mine, yes?"

"Y-yeah… I didn't think you caught that part."

Yukina refuted in an exceedingly serious tone.

"No, I did. I do not believe Kanon or Astarte would tell lies…though a Peeping Tom is another story."

"Don't call me a Peeping Tom!!"

Yukina then pointed out the obvious.

"Besides, there is also what Sayaka and the princess said."

Kojou felt ashamed of himself for letting that slip his mind.

"Oh right… They went to get on an airplane and jumped to the sub-float, right?"

Sayaka and La Folia had been tossed to a place far from the airport; Kojou had entered his neighbor's bathroom. The locations and seriousness were completely different, but in both cases, instantaneous spatial shifts had been involved.

Yukina carefully chose her words as she murmured.

"Perhaps there is some kind of distortion occurring in the space surrounding Itogami Island."

Kojou audibly drew in his breath.

Spatial control, using that for instantaneous movement—wasn't that what Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void, specialized in—?

"Spatial distortions…? Do you think this might have something to do with

Natsuki disappearing?”

“I do not know. However, I feel like the timing is too similar to be a mere coincidence.”

“Seems like it.” Kojou nodded with a twist of his lips. “It’d be nice if we could get in touch with Natsuki, but where should we look for her?”

Yukina spoke with a tone tinged with faint unease. “In this situation, carelessly walking around is dangerous. In any event, let’s wait and see for the moment. Please return to your own residence, senpai. There’s a chance Nagisa and Yuuma might become wrapped up in this. Also, there is no guarantee you will get back safely next time.”

“I see. You have a point.”

This time, Kojou had happened to go as far as the bathroom of Yukina’s next-door apartment, but next time might not be on such a small scale. If the next warp sent him to the stratosphere or the bottom of the sea, he might perish instantly, unable to return.

Viewed from that perspective, Kojou’s experience earlier was an incredible stroke of good fortune.

After all, he hadn’t been tossed out into a busy shopping district buck naked; the people at his destination were Kanon and Astarte, both acquaintances.

Subconsciously recalling how they looked in the bath, Kojou blessed his good fortune with renewed fervor.

As Kojou did so, Yukina shot him an emotionless glare even scarier than before.

“Senpai…”

Obeying his animal instincts, Kojou prostrated himself once again.

“I’m really, really sorry…”

7

When Kojou returned to his own residence, it was Nagisa and Yuuma who awaited him, in the bath.

That was not to say that Kojou was forcibly warped into their bathroom the instant he entered the doorway. It was simply that Nagisa's and Yuuma's voices from the bathroom were so loud that Kojou could hear them all the way from the living room. It was all kinds of girl talk about if they had boyfriends or not, what sort of guys they liked, ways to make your breasts bigger, and lurid rumors not meant for the ears of boys—all forbidden topics for discussion that Kojou knew nothing about.

Yes, he was curious, but these really weren't subjects he wanted to hear about from his own little sister's mouth. In spite of that, he didn't have it in him to announce, *I can hear you*, and so, with something of a heavy heart, Kojou grabbed a drink in a PET bottle and went out onto the veranda.

Even Nagisa and Yuuma's careless banter was not audible from outside the apartment.

Leaning limply against the railing, Kojou poured the lukewarm sports drink down his throat. Then, he suddenly saw something that made his blood run cold.

"…Eh?!"

The hand holding the PET bottle shuddered. Kojou was looking at a park on a plateau on the other side of the street. The distance had to be almost a full kilometer away.

If Kojou had not had vampiric vision kick in after sunset as it was then, and if the clothed man standing there did not stand out, he would surely never have noticed.

"No…way. What's *he* doing here…?!"

Kojou put some shoes on and flew out of the apartment in great haste, running down the apartment complex's stairs. He leaped over the exterior fence and plunged down the road, taking the shortest possible route toward the plateau. It was times like this that made Kojou curse his body for not being able to fly through the air in true vampiric fashion.

Then Kojou, gasping for breath, arrived in the park that was his destination.

The man was standing on the plateau just as before. He was coldly lording over the nighttime skyline as a faint surge of bloodlust rose all around him.

“—Rudolf Eustach!”

Kojou called out to the man by his name. He was a blond foreigner, a soldier with his hair cut very short. His left eye was covered up by a metallic, eyepatch-like monocle.

He was over 190 centimeters tall, covered with a priest’s habit, and wore a metal suit of armor under that. It was an armored augmentation suit employed by heavy army infantry.

You didn’t exactly confuse a guy like that with someone else.

Two months prior, the Lotharingian Armed Apostle, Rudolf Eustach, Astarte’s master, had engaged Kojou and Yukina in a deadly duel, bringing Itogami Island to the very edge of destruction.

“Why are you here?! Didn’t you go back to Lotharingia—?!”

His tone was gentle, even as Kojou glared at him with a look of raw, shaking emotion.

“To meet someone who knows my common name… Who might you be?”

Kojou yelled indignantly.

“Don’t play dumb with me! Itogami Island decided to return the holy relic already. You shouldn’t have any business here. Or did you come here to take Astarte back?”

“If you have discerned my objective, this, I cannot ignore.”

Eustach drew his weapon from the back of his habit. Kojou recognized the metal bardiche. It was a battle axe with a giant blade.

His monocle flared red over and over as it scrutinized Kojou. Eustach’s vision was filled with a heads-up display from the analysis.

“A vampire of unknown bloodline…? Mmm… If you are an abominable demon, you are here to interfere with my crusade. As an Armed Apostle, I have no reason to hesitate to execute thee!”

“Don’t you remember who I am…?!”

He and Eustach were talking past each other. That fact enveloped Kojou in

despair. Kojou knew why he hated Itogami Island and had attempted to destroy it. That battle was over. Many had paid the price, but Itogami Island had escaped destruction by the skin of its teeth, and Eustach had returned to his own nation.

“Stop it, old man. You and I don’t have any more reason to fight—”

“Silence, demon!” Eustach roared.

He unleashed his bardiche down at Kojou, his body accelerated by the augmentation suit. It was too fast to be dodged, but Kojou somehow managed to evade the attack anyway. He’d fought Eustach more than once before; he was well aware of the man’s might.

“Stop, old man…!”

Eustach easily pulverized the concrete bench Kojou had used as a shield. His destructive power was as nutty as usual. This was no opponent Kojou could defeat with his bare hands.

At this rate, Kojou would be slain with ease before he could get through to the guy—

“Shit, you damn hard-ass! C’mon over, Regulus…!”

Out of other options, Kojou began to summon his Beast Vassal.

These were beasts summoned from another world that dwelled in his own vampiric “blood.” When materialized, they were giant masses of demonic energy; they were the reason vampires were known and feared as the mightiest of demonkind.

Only the unlimited negative life energy of a vampire could endure the extreme consumption of the host’s life force required to use a Beast Vassal. In turn, the destructive might of a Beast Vassal was overwhelming.

That went even more for the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, with each said to unleash destruction equal to a natural disaster. Even a Lotharingian Armed Apostle had no way to oppose such might.

But Eustach’s attacks did not cease even so—

“—Too slow!”

Eustach's battle-axe was faster than Kojou's Beast Vassal summons. Gazing dumbfounded at the giant blade lunging at him, Kojou resigned himself to death.

Even with the power of the World's Mightiest Vampire, Kojou himself was a combat amateur. The Lotharingian Armed Apostle simply was not an opponent he could defeat without Yukina's aid.

Yet the impact of the battle-axe did not assail the despairing Kojou.

"…Old man…?"

Kojou looked around the park in a daze, seeing nothing but the surface of the ground.

There was no sign of the large Armed Apostle. He and the bardiche he had swung down had both vanished.

There was no sign of anyone else in the park here at night, only Kojou and the unreliable light of a few lampposts.

He thought he was hearing things, but it was actually the sound of firecrackers for the night before the Hollow Eve Festival's opening far off in the distance.

Save for the remains of the wrecked bench, all signs of Eustach had vanished.

8

Kojou dragged his tired body back to the apartment building.

He still had no idea what had happened; he felt like he'd just had a bad dream.

Properly speaking, encountering Eustach was something he should have reported to Yukina. But having tossed the thought around, Kojou decided to keep it quiet for a little while. After all, Astarte was right there in Yukina's apartment. He didn't want to make her worry without cause; after all, he still had no proof the Armed Apostle had really been there.

Yuuma was the only one in the apartment to greet Kojou.

"Welcome back, Kojou."

It'd been a while since she'd gotten out of the bath, with her hair now

completely dry. When he glanced at the clock, it was close to midnight. He was late getting back because he'd blundered around the park looking for clues after Eustach vanished.

"Sorry I'm so late… Huh?"

As Kojou kicked off his shoes and returned to the living room, he looked around the apartment for any sign of his little sister.

"Nagisa's asleep already. Seems like she really wore herself out."

"…She's such a grade schooler."

Kojou made an exasperated sigh as he checked and saw that the lights in Nagisa's room were out.

Unfamiliar clothes were scattered all around the living room. There was a Victorian dress; a pirate outfit; bunny girl and cat ears outfits; angel, vampire, and even jack-o'-lantern outfits—

"What's all this?"

"We were trying them out." Yuuma spoke, looking up at the bewildered Kojou in apparent amusement. "Apparently, it's *tradition* for people attending the Hollow Eve Festival to wear a disguise."

"Cosplay outfits, huh…? That Nagisa, when did she get all these together?"

Kojou was half beside himself as he murmured.

His little sister loved events to begin with, but she wasn't anywhere near this worked up the year before. No doubt she'd outdone herself this year because Yuuma was coming over to play.

Looking more closely, half of the outfits were sized for boys. *I'm soooo glad I was out*, Kojou thought with a sigh of relief. If he'd still been in the apartment building, he'd have been getting fitted for outfits all that time.

Kojou asked the question that was nagging at him a bit.

"Are you gonna be wearing something, Yuuma?"

At the moment, Yuuma was wearing a totally-not-sexy sweatshirt/sweatpants combo in place of pajamas. It was very Yuuma-ish on one level, but he did have a

simple interest in what kind of outfit she'd picked.

Yuuma stood up as she spoke.

"Want a peek? I'll have to change into it."

"Sure," Kojou causally replied. "Sorry to make you work."

Yuuma moved a hand to her sweatpants as she spoke.

"It's fine. It's not gonna take long anyway."

Then right before Kojou's eyes, she suddenly strippped them off. The generous display of her white thighs drew in Kojou's gaze.

"Y-Yuuma…?! When you say change… Wait, here?!"

Yuuma smiled teasingly as she shifted her hands to the chest of her sweatshirt.

"What's the big deal? We used to do this all the time."

She slowly tugged it down like she was trying to get a reaction out of Kojou.

"That's when we were kids!! Now you're—"

Yuuma burst into a small giggle as she stripped off her sweatshirt.

"Now I'm what…?"

The moment before Kojou was going to avert his eyes as quickly as he could, he noticed she was wearing something else in place of underwear.

"Yuuma…that's…"

Yuuma smiled proudly as she gazed up at the still thoroughly rocked Kojou.

"Yeah, it's witch cosplay. I put it on underneath to surprise you. It was kind of a tight fit, though."

The outfit she was now dressed in was a black dress with a very short skirt and one big ribbon tied over her breasts. Together with the triangular hat and the fishnets she was wearing, she sure did look like a witch.

Mindful of Kojou's silence, Yuuma had a rare look of unease on her face as she asked, "Weird to see me wearing something like this, huh?"

Kojou replied as his gaze wandered about.

“No, I think it’s a good fit, but…”

The skirt was *extremely* short and the shoulders were wide open. Plus, it really showed off all of her body lines. Certainly, you had to call it a good fit for Yuuma’s stylishness. But in addition, it was far too exposing. He felt like it wasn’t a getup he should be seeing her in late at night with just the two of them.

For some reason, watching Kojou slip into suspect behavior apparently made Yuuma happy as she murmured, “That so. I’m so glad.”

Then, she suddenly drew her face close, right before Kojou’s eyes.

“Kojou.”

“Huh?”

Yuuma touched her own cheek.

“You’re bleeding. On your cheek.”

Kojou stroked his own face, mimicking her.

“Whoa, you’re right… A piece of that bench must’ve cut me.”

Feeling the unexpected slipperiness of blood, Kojou stared dumbfounded at his fingertips. Perhaps his current arousal had opened up a wound sustained during the battle with Eustach.

“Hold on a sec. I’ll get a Band-Aid.”

As Yuuma spoke, she fetched a portable first aid kit out of a pocket of the gym clothes she’d stripped off. At her invitation, Kojou sat down on the spot. Yuuma leaned over him from the front, resulting in them looking at each other at a very close, intimate distance.

Kojou flapped his lips casually to break the tension.

“This kinda brings me back.”

Yuuma mixed a strained smile into her nod.

“That’s because you got hurt a lot, Kojou. That got me into the habit of walking around with a first aid kit.”

“Wasn’t that ’cause I was following you around doing reckless things with

you?”

Yuuma played dumb about that part as she reached out to touch Kojou’s cheek.

“That so?”

This isn’t good, thought Kojou with internal apprehension. The extremely exposing outfit together with Yuuma leaning forward like that made him unable to ignore her cleavage. She laughed at Kojou’s obvious nervousness.

“Your cheeks are red, Kojou.”

Kojou turned his face as he spoke in a faint voice.

“That’s ’cause you’re too close.”

Yuuma gently narrowed her eyes.

“I’m glad.”

“About what…?”

“I thought you’d act exactly like you used to and wouldn’t be able to see me as a girl. I put a fair bit of work into it, you know.”

Kojou felt quite surprised at Yuuma’s unexpected confession.

“You sure caught me by surprise, though. You wouldn’t have been caught dead wearing that outfit way back.”

Yuuma’s smile seemed to carry disappointment as she slumped her shoulders. Kojou didn’t understand the reason that’d deflate her.

“Well, that’s not really true, but anyway…”

“Well, you’re you, I mean.” Kojou couldn’t think of it any other way so he just said it. “I mean, you’ve been cute since way back, Yuuma.”

For a moment, Yuuma was at a loss for words, looking at Kojou with her eyes wide open. A very lonely expression came over her. “That’s just like you, Kojou. So, for example, if I stopped being human anymore, would you be able to say the same thing?”

Kojou answered Yuuma’s joking words with a decisive declaration. “Don’t

worry about that, I know lots of people who aren't normal folks. One more ain't gonna surprise me."

In just the room next door was an apprentice Attack Mage from a special agency, a homunculus, and a former angel. More important than all of that, Kojou himself had become the monster known as the Fourth Primogenitor. He didn't think Yuuma was gonna turn into anything stranger than *that*.

Yuuma murmured in visible satisfaction as she moved her hands around Kojou as if to embrace him.

"That so… This is a Demon Sanctuary after all… Now I know for sure. You really are the only one for me, Kojou."

Kojou was in shock at the sensation conveyed by his cheek.

"…Yuuma?"

Yuuma was licking Kojou's wound. She was licking the blood of the vampire called the Fourth Primogenitor.

Then, just like that, she pressed her own lips against Kojou's.

“Wha…?!”

The space behind Yuuma swayed, wavering like a ripple. Something from the other side gently showed its face as if rising from the bottom of a deep lake.

It was a giant blue malevolent silhouette— Yuuma’s voice gently echoed into Kojou’s ear.

“Now, let the festivities begin, Kojou.”

As if responding to that sweet echo’s invitation, Kojou’s consciousness gently fell into a haze, and then, deeper and deeper into the darkness…

Chapter Three
Fancy Dress Parade

CHAPTER THREE

FANCY DRESS PARADE

1

There was once a girl who lived alone in a small castle deep in a forest.

The castle had everything she needed. It had clean rooms and an uncountable number of exquisite pieces of clothing. Her diet was completely controlled. Her compulsory education had a tightly packed curriculum. In that castle, the girl felt like even her dreams were being controlled.

The girl did not know the faces of her parents. She was separated from her mother immediately after birth and was raised by maidservants dispatched by the organization. The girl felt no emotion whatsoever when she was told she would meet her mother in a place far away once she turned sixteen.

The girl awoke at the appointed time, dressed in the appointed outfit, and went to study at the appointed school. She had no close friends; she did not think any were needed. She had been taught that school was where one learned to deceive others. Even there, the girl's performance was perfect: Her classmates doted on her, and the teachers recognized her as an excellent, trouble-free pupil.

Then, at the appointed hour, the girl returned to the castle within the forest. Every day passed like this without a single thing going awry. They were days that passed exactly as planned—

The small tear in the seam of that plan was formed in the afternoon of a day just before summer.

A brother and sister had come into the girl's forest to play.

They were far from perfect beings. Their skin was sunburned, their hair was disheveled, and the brother's front teeth were missing. They argued over the smallest things, made each other cry, and then held each other's hands, laughing as if having more fun than anyone else.

The young siblings had apparently built a secret base inside the forest. It was a grand cottage built from a discarded cardboard box and tree branches they had gathered together. It wasn't something that should have existed on private land controlled by the organization.

However, the girl did not report it to the maidservants who administered the land, for she wanted to watch the siblings at a distance while they played.

Finally, the girl cropped off the long, beautiful hair she had been granted. It was quite some time later before she realized that she'd done it out of her fondness for the young siblings.

A short time after that, the girl exchanged words with them.

Outside the forest, when the girl just happened to be passing close to them, the brother of the two called out to her without warning.

"Hey, you! Hold my hand and don't let go!"

"Ah…?"

When the bewildered girl firmly gripped his hand, the boy held on as he went right over the edge of a precipice. Without any idea what was going on, the girl desperately supported his body, for if she had not, it was possible she would fall right down with him. The cliff was not so high, but pointy tree branches were sticking out all over it. It was unlikely she'd escape unscathed.

Finally, the boy clawed his way back up from the precipice. His hand was gripping a small hat that had fallen below, blown away by the wind.

The boy put the dirty hat right on top of the head of his moist-eyed little sister.

"Here, Nagisa."

A beaming smile came over his little sister's face. The sight gradually gave the girl a sense of accomplishment. It was the first time she'd been enveloped by *emotion*. It was the only thing she'd ever obtained that defied the plan.

The boy tried to talk with a cheerful, smiling face, missing front teeth and all.

“Thanks, you were a huge help. You’re stronger than I figured, er…”

Drawn in by that look, the girl’s lips subconsciously formed a smile.

“—I’m Yuuma. Yuuma Tokoyogi.”

“Nice to meet you, Yuuma.”

Even now, the girl had not forgotten the warmth his hand conveyed when pressed to her own.

However, now that the girl had betrayed that warmth, it continued to torment her soul.

It was a perfect plan, and it would be executed perfectly, heedless of the girl’s wishes.

2

Kojou opened his eyes atop the bed. It was the very familiar sight of his bedroom.

It was a bit past eight in the morning. He felt like sleeping in late, but he felt fresher than he normally did; perhaps he just felt excited about the morning of the festival.

“Morning…huh?”

Kojou remained in bed lying faceup as he murmured absentmindedly.

He felt like a lot had happened the night before. He’d been caught up in spatial distortions, had a reunion with the Lotharingian Armed Apostle, and he… thought Yuuma had been crawling all over him.

But his memory was oddly vague right around that point. Kojou hadn’t engaged with Eustach again since his vanishing like an illusion. And Yuuma had been behaving oddly. He’d seen the illusion of a ghastly shadow emerge from her back, too. He didn’t think it had occurred in real life. Indeed, it was far easier to accept as something that he’d thought up in some dream.

“Guess I saw a…pretty weird dream, huh?”

So Kojou told himself as he rose up from the bed.

His sudden sense of unease was likely due to the odd lightness of his body. The chronic morning lethargy and sense of fatigue that had plagued him since becoming a vampire had vanished. It was rare that a morning felt so good.

“Nagisa’s…still asleep, I guess?”

Thinking that the apartment was oddly quiet, Kojou went into the living room. But he saw no sight of Nagisa anywhere. He knocked on her bedroom door just to be sure, but no reply came. The bathroom light was off, too. There was only food for one person prepared in the dining room.

“Did they go out, just the two of ’em…?” Kojou murmured without any special concern. Maybe she’d just gone out for a stroll; it was also possible they’d gone to play in Yukina’s apartment. That surely didn’t merit much thought.

Since she’d gone through all the trouble, Kojou sat in a chair to help himself to breakfast; that was when he felt something was *really* off.

Kojou’s slender, shapely legs stretched beyond the hem of the short skirt.

“Wha…?”

What am I wearing girls’ clothes for? thought the shaken Kojou. The little black dress was surely the one Yuuma had worn the night before.

But Kojou finally realized that it wasn’t just clothes that he’d swapped with her.

As he raised his hands before him, his fingers were surprisingly thin and delicate. The view down low was obstructed by an unexpected swell of his chest. The curves of his bare legs had baby-like skin, lacking leg hair or any other unsightly marks. He also realized he was ten centimeters or so shorter than he ought to be.

“Wha…?”

Kojou flew into the washroom and looked at the mirror within.

The graceful visage of a girl was reflected by it, paired with somewhat

disheveled bobbed hair.

The eyes displayed within were wide with surprise. The eyelashes were long; the bridge of the nose was delicate. The face within the mirror, reminiscent of what she looked like when she was younger, was that of his old friend, Yuuma Tokoyogi.

Kojou did pantomime over and over. He confirmed with his own eyes that her body was moving according to his will. He no longer had any room for doubt. Kojou's mind had been put into Yuuma's body.

Kojou and Yuuma had switched bodies.

And Kojou's body had vanished somewhere, with Yuuma's mind in it.

"What the *hellll*?!"

The shout that came out of Kojou's mouth was in the clear, high-pitched voice of a girl.

Rushing into the corridor, Kojou headed straight for the entryway to the apartment next door. The doorplate indicated it was room 705. It was the apartment Yukina had moved into some two months before. He couldn't think of anyone else he could discuss an emergency situation like this with.

"…So what happened last night wasn't a dream, then?!"

Kojou pushed the buzzer and roughly thrust both his hands against the wall.

He remembered the sight of the giant shadow that had floated up from Yuuma's back. It was an ominous blue shadow, its body clad in armor like that of a knight. There was no face under its mysterious, skull-like helmet, only a dark, unfathomable void. Perhaps Yuuma had used the power of the blue shadow to swap bodies with him.

But Kojou didn't understand *why* Yuuma had that kind of power. Nor did he understand why it was necessary for her to do such a thing.

Yukina opened the door halfway and poked her face out of the gap.

"…Good morning, Yuuma. Has something…happened?"

She seemed a bit suspicious as to why Yuuma would suddenly visit her all by

herself. That fact rocked Kojou all the more.

So Kojou really did look like Yuuma, even to Yukina's eyes. Kojou had entertained the possibility that it was just some sort of hypnotic suggestion affecting him alone, but it was not to be.

"Himeragi. Sorry, it's me."

Kojou spoke while pointing to "his" face. Yukina blinked her eyes as if finding his behavior odd.

"Ah yes…?"

"Er, ah, just calm down and hear me out, okay?"

"Yuuma, I'm sorry… Can you come inside? Here is a little…"

Yukina gently extended her hand through the gap of the door and led Kojou in. Kojou followed through the entry door, thinking Yukina's behavior to be unexpectedly friendly of her.

His eyes went wide as he saw what Yukina was standing there in.

"Huh?"

Yukina made her bashful-seeming apology while wearing nothing but a pajama top.

"I'm sorry, I can't really have a conversation through the doorway dressed like this."

The hem just *barely* covered her hips, but everything from the top of her thighs on down was completely bare; she'd apparently let her guard down thinking that they were both girls.

When he looked harder, Kanon and Astarte were changing clothes in the middle of her living room, too.

"Everyone was trying to pick what costumes to wear for the festival. Nagisa prepared a whole bunch of them, but they're all quite exposing, you see…"

"I-I see…"

Apparently Nagisa had procured costumes not just for herself, but for Yukina and the others, too.

No doubt she really wanted her friend to fully enjoy her very first Hollow Eve Festival. It was a very meddlesome, Nagisa-like thought.

Kanon had picked out a nun outfit. It was a trim, adorable design, with frills adorning the collar and sleeves. But it seemed that her hands couldn't reach the fastener; her back was fully open, with her bare snow-white skin looking extremely exposed through the gap. It was a mix of the solemn and the erotic.

Taking great pains to pull his eyes from Kanon's back, Kojou noticed the presence of the other girl in the room. Her presence stood out *so* much that he hadn't consciously registered it.

If he had to describe it, her silhouette was like that of an oversized Buddhist monk.

The small girl wore a bodysuit with an orange cape coat and a stupidly huge pumpkin on her head. It certainly was *cute*, but it was the kind of cute where if you got too close, the girl might start bawling like a child.

"Are you…Astarte?"

As Kojou very timidly posed his question, the jack-o'-lantern's two eyes emitted a glittering light in lieu of a nod.

"Affirmative. I have come to like this outfit."

"That so. Well, I suppose it does suit you pretty nicely…"

Kanon gently posed a question as she pulled her hips back a little and looked at Kojou. "And you are a witch, Yuuma? Very cute."

Those words reminded Kojou of how he currently looked. He was in a one-piece minidress with a ribbon tied over his breasts. It was the same witch cosplay outfit Yuuma had been wearing the night before.

"Er…that's not it. I don't know how to explain this, but…Yuuma's not here. Nagisa's gone, too!"

Yukina's eyes widened as she saw how tense Kojou's shoulders were. "Uh?"

No doubt she had no way to process Yuuma herself saying *she* was gone. Kojou could sympathize.

Astarte and Kanon hurried over to Yuuma and looked at her with mystified expressions.

"I mean, I'm Yuuma, but I'm not Yuuma on the inside!" he tried to explain.

She'd probably picked up on Kojou's mannerisms and speaking style.

"…You don't mean you're…Akatsuki-senpai?" Yukina asked with her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Leave it to a shrine maiden to have sharp intuition.

Kojou, spontaneously filled with deep emotion, gripped Yukina's hand. "Himeragi!"

He was indeed overwhelmed with relief to have his existence acknowledged no matter how his appearance had changed.

But Yukina's expression was still clouded with doubt. "R-really?"

Kojou whispered into Yukina's ear so that Kanon and Astarte could not hear. "I know it's hard to believe, but I'm dead serious. Right…! I know all about 'I'm really the Fourth Primogenitor,' and you're a Sword Shaman from the Lion King Agency here to watch over me."

Unconvinced, Yukina murmured back with a cautious demeanor. “…You could have easily unearthed that much yourself. You could also have heard it directly from senpai.”

Perhaps she suspected that Kojou and Yuuma were working together behind her back to play an elaborate prank on her.

Yukina suddenly pointed to her guitar case. “Right…do you remember what this little one’s called?”

There was something small and humanoid-shaped tied to the handle. It was a beckoning cat-style mascot.

“That’s…Manekin-Kong, right? The one I got for you at the game center.”

Kojou spoke in a tone full of confidence. Besides Natsuki, who happened to show up at the time, the only ones who knew about that were Kojou and Yukina. Surely that proved Kojou was who he said he was.

“It’s *Nekoma*.” Yukina’s lips tapered in a fierce, sullen pout. The sight of her in such a foul mood unnerved Kojou. That was when Kanon politely raised her hand.

“Ah, where did…Akatsuki and I first meet?”

“The roof of the middle school building. You were, ah, handing an abandoned cat over to Takashimizu from the soccer club, right?”

Kojou eagerly replied with the feeling that he’d just been rescued. That moment stood out a lot so he remembered it easily.

Surely it was a question only someone who’d been there at the time could answer.

The next question was from Astarte the jack-o’-lantern.

“Question. Which region produces the black tea my master enjoys?”

“Natsuki’s favorite, huh…? She said it was tea candy from Ceylon, didn’t she? Said it gave the tea an herbal flavor or something…”

Kojou was able to smoothly field even a question about his homeroom teacher’s idiosyncrasies. Bad-tasting black tea put Natsuki in an exceptionally

bad mood; to a serial student guidance offender like Kojou, knowing her tastes was a matter of life or death.

“Ding-ding-ding.” Astarte emotionlessly announced that his answer was correct.

“So why didn’t he remember Nekoma,” Yukina murmured in a pout, her cheeks puffed up.

In spite of that, the exchange appeared to have convinced Yukina and the others of the truth of Kojou’s assertion.

“Then you really are senpai…?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along!”

“So senpai’s mind is inside of Yuuma’s body…? Then where is senpai’s body right now?”

Yukina raised her eyebrows as she asked. Kojou meekly shook his head.

“I don’t know! You’d think Yuuma’s walking around in my body, but I haven’t seen her anywhere around here…”

Yukina’s expression grew graver.

“Perhaps she…left on her own? But to think she could do such a thing without triggering my surveillance *shikigami*…”

Seeing the gravity of her look, Kojou, too, realized what a big problem that was. It was the body of Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor… In other words, that of the World’s Mightiest Vampire. Yuuma had stolen it, and they had no idea where she’d taken it. It was an emergency situation on the same level as, say, a ballistic nuclear missile submarine being stolen.

“Why would she do such a thing…?”

“I don’t know that, either. Last night I met old man Eustach, and when I thought I was gonna buy the farm, the old man vanished. Then when I got back to my apartment, Nagisa was asleep, and Yuuma was waiting for me dressed like this… Right, I lost consciousness right around when she kissed me.”

Listening to Kojou’s explanation, Yukina’s eyes lowered to half-mast in

reproach.

“…You kissed Yuuma?”

Kojou subconsciously backed up a step from the glacial tone of her voice.

“No, no, no! That’s *not* the problem here!”

He wondered why she’d responded to *that* ahead of all sorts of other and surely more crucial bits of information.

“I mean, right now Yuuma’s got my body, and we switched at that exact moment, so like, we should just say it doesn’t count…”

Yukina murmured as she pressed down on the hem of her pajama top, having realized something exceedingly important.

“I see…so right now it’s *senpai* in Yuuma’s body…”

Her cheeks reddened before his eyes. Thinking that she was among girls, she was in an indecent state before Kojou, having been caught in the middle of changing clothes. It *really* wasn’t the time for Kojou to point out that her stripped-off pajama bottom and panties drying out after the wash were on full display in her apartment.

Kanon, with her back wide open, and Astarte the Jack-o’-Lantern both tensed.

Reproachful glares from all three girls poured onto Kojou as a single flood. Kojou desperately shook his head.

“Wait, wait, wait, the problem’s that Yukina led me right in here…! And right now we’re *all girls*, so it’s not a big deal, right…?”

Yukina’s pronouncement came as a fierce, burning aura enveloped her.

“No mercy!”

Once more, but in an excessively cute voice, Kojou’s scream echoed around the apartment building in the morning—

3

Around that time, Sayaka Kirasaka froze in shock on top of an ornate double

bed.

A little seabird perched in a small window was chirping in a cute voice. The bright rays of the morning sun passed through a white lace curtain. Cold sweat poured over Sayaka as her long light brown hair remained scattered around the sheet.

“How…did this happen…?”

Sayaka was dressed in her undergarments, but that was hardly of major concern. She’d taken off her clothes before sleep so that they wouldn’t crease. She was unnerved for an entirely different reason.

Lying right beside Sayaka on the bed was another girl, still asleep, close to her as if they’d been snuggling. Her beautiful silver hair seemed to sparkle in the light. Furthermore, she wasn’t wearing a single stitch of clothing.

“Mm…”

The silver-haired girl’s eyes opened, perhaps from having heard Sayaka murmur. Her eyelids, adorned with long eyelashes, opened; her aquamarine-like eyes reflected Sayaka in them. She made a smile and a small giggle that somehow seemed mischievous.

“Good morning, Sayaka. You were wonderful last night.”

“Gaaaah!”

Sayaka thrust off the blanket and sat up with great vigor. She gave her hair, all frumpy from sleep, a hard brush and shouted in a shrill voice.

“What are you *saying*?! Would you *please* not say things that’d give people the wrong idea like that?!”

The silver-haired girl—La Folia—smiled up at Sayaka, making no move to conceal her beautiful nude body.

“Oh, my… My maidservants told me that this is how Japanese people greet those sharing the same bed with them… Am I mistaken?”

“You’re wrong! Er, in one sense, you’re not wrong, but…that’s not a greeting you use for someone who just happened to be sleeping beside… Oh, to hell with it!”

Sayaka clutched her head as she looked around. She had no way to tell if the princess, who happened to be very fluent in Japanese, was just clueless, or perhaps was trolling her on purpose. At any rate, she thought there was something *seriously* wrong with how the Aldegian royal family selected its maids.

“What are you so upset about, I wonder?”

“Why aren’t you wearing any clothes, princess?!”

La Folia made a mystified tilt of her head as she replied.

“I do not have a nightgown with me so it could not be helped.”

It seemed that Sayaka, of the same gender, was the only one who’d seen her clad in nothing but the bedsheet.

“At any rate, it is quite fortuitous to have awoken safely on top of the bed. In this circumstance, I was resigned to the possibility I would awaken in a completely unknown place this morning.”

“…You have a point. We’re very fortunate to be safe after all those random teleports over and over again.”

Sayaka put on a serious face and nodded at the princess’s unexpectedly sensible words.

The previous morning, they’d been caught in a spatial distortion, cause as yet unknown, warping them from the airport to the sub-float currently being dismantled. Then, when they’d made it back to the city on foot, they were just about to get into a taxi they’d hailed when they were thrown once more to parts unknown.

Though they’d been in contact with the princess’s knight escorts, and had even succeeded in meeting up with them a number of times, new teleports invariably intervened, so that experiment had ended in failure. Since the teleports occurred completely randomly, at street curbs, the doors of buildings and vehicles, and even the turnstiles of trains, Sayaka and La Folia had been unable to develop a counterstrategy.

Apparently Sayaka and La Folia weren’t the only ones affected by the mysterious spatial anomalies. Somewhere along the way, they’d lost contact

with the knight escorts and the Island Guard. They, too, had been wrapped up in the phenomenon.

With their cell phone batteries dry and their wits at an end as the sun set, they were finally warped to this hotel room. Then, La Folia had suggested they spend the night there. Sayaka couldn't help but notice that the interior design wasn't likely to exist outside of a gaudy hourly hotel; but given that the princess was oddly in love with the room, Sayaka was hardly in a position to refuse.

"It's pleasant to have such a big bed, too. I was surprised how the lighting in the room is pink and how there's glass around the tub… Is this part of the hot spring culture peculiar to Japan?"

"No, that's *definitely* not the case…" Sayaka decisively rebutted the princess's words to uphold the good name of hot spring culture.

"Did your cell phone finish charging?"

"Ah yes, it did." Prompted by La Folia's question, Sayaka picked up the recharged cell phone.

The suite came equipped with its own cell phone charger. This was another reason Sayaka did not reject the princess staying the night here.

"There's an e-mail addressed to you, princess. It seems that we're able to request aid from the Aldegian knights and the Island Guard using current GPS data, but…"

La Folia bluntly shook her head. "No, it is no doubt futile to do so. Even if they rendezvoused with us, it is nigh impossible that we could safely depart from Itogami Island. No doubt we alone would be thrown somewhere else yet again. Also, I doubt the Island Guard has any spare personnel to dispatch to come to our aid."

Sayaka agreed with the princess's opinion. "I suppose not. You certainly have a point there."

Though nothing had been announced to the general public, the spatial distortions seemed to be occurring across nearly all of Itogami Island. Though no incidents had resulted in actual fatalities, traffic within the city was heavily affected nonetheless. It hadn't become a public concern thanks to the Gigafloat

Management Corporation's public relations management and the arrival of a large number of guests for the Hollow Eve Festival day, meaning a large amount of congestion was inevitable to begin with.

"It would seem that these spatial anomalies are not directed specifically at us," La Folia continued. "After all, if the objective was to capture us, we would have surely come under direct assault long ago."

The princess's calm analysis might have been mistaken for extravagance by some, but appearances notwithstanding, she possessed an incredibly sharp intellect.

"There's way too many of them, though," replied Sayaka. "Enough that we got wrapped up in it and teleported left and right."

"Quite correct, Sayaka." La Folia smiled pleasantly as she fielded Sayaka's rebuttal. "But I was thinking…perhaps the magical and spiritual power that we possess attracts the phenomenon to us?"

Sayaka sank into thought with a serious look on her face.

"In other words, space bends in response to strong spiritual power?"

The princess's hypothesis seemed a wild one at first, but certainly, that could explain why Sayaka and La Folia in particular had been heavily affected by it.

Sayaka the Shamanic War Dancer had the attributes of an excellent shrine maiden, but La Folia, from the Aldegian royal family, was a spiritual medium of even greater, truly exceptional power. In the first place, they had been in the presence of Dimitrie Vattler when the first instance of the phenomenon occurred. He was an aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire, a pureblood vampire descended from the First Primogenitor; there was no doubting he had enormous magical power.

"Itogami Island is an artificial island constructed on top of the dragon lines that flow over the ocean's surface," the princess continued. "Logically, if spatial distortions are occurring in response to strong magical power, their effects are spread throughout the entire island."

Sayaka's shoulders unconsciously shuddered as she listened. The princess's statement caused her to recall something unpleasant.

“If you’ll pardon me, princess… If your hypothesis about the effect of the distortions being stronger in proportion to the power of one’s spiritual or magical power is correct, then…”

A rare melancholic look came over La Folia as she replied.

“Yes. There is someone who would be suffering even graver effects than we are. No, rather, it is possible that his very existence is one of the causes of this anomaly…”

Even on Itogami Island, home to countless demons, neither of them had to think of who possessed the greatest, most titanic magical energy of all. The answer was obvious: the World’s Mightiest Vampire—the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki.

“Th…that man… I turn my back for just one second and something like *this* happens…”

Sayaka instantly called the number from her cell phone’s “Favorites” list. Fortunately, the call connected instantly.

“Hello, are you listening?! Kojou Akatsuki?!”

“Kirasaka? Are you guys all right?”

“…Huh?”

Hearing a girl’s voice from the phone, Sayaka was at a loss for words. The tone of voice was very familiar to her, but she’d never heard the voice before.

“Who are you? Where is Kojou Akatsuki?”

“Ahh…er, that’s…gonna be a…long story…”

Sayaka felt great reluctance from the speaker on the other end. She realized that put her in an exceptionally foul mood. Apparently, that man had gotten wrapped up in trouble with *yet another* girl, somewhere behind Sayaka’s back.

After a short pause, she heard a very different girl’s voice over the phone.

“Ah, is this Sayaka?”

This time, Sayaka knew the speaker. There was no way Sayaka could mistake the sound of *her* voice.

“Yukina?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, for various reasons senpai cannot come to the phone right now, so I…”

“I-is that so? Is he all right?! Did something happen to that Pervogenitor?”

“Ah?”

Hearing the voice of her beloved former roommate, Sayaka became excited to the point of speaking complete gibberish. She always went off the rails when doting on Yukina to excess.

Seeing this, La Folia took the cell phone from Sayaka’s hand and picked up where things left off with practiced skill.

“Has something strange occurred on your end, Yukina? Particularly where Kojou is concerned?”

Yukina conveyed the situation in a roundabout fashion.

“Th-that’s right. It’s fair to say that a rather unbelievable emergency situation has occurred where senpai is concerned…”

Apparently things were in a rather chaotic state on their end. Having confirmed this, La Folia smiled to herself.

“My…”

“…Why are you so amused by this?”

“Ah, nothing at all. So that is the reason Kojou cannot come to the phone right now?”

“Yes. Ah, a variety of troublesome things have occurred so…”

Having said this, Yukina let out a sigh. The gist seemed to be that he had indeed been involved in some kind of anomaly, but was not in any immediate danger. Knowing that was plenty.

With a tone of concern, Yukina asked…

“Incidentally, where are the two of you?”

La Folia casually conveyed the essential facts.

“In a hotel. Sayaka and I spent the night together.”

“Aaaa!” went Sayaka, letting out an anguished cry. “It’s not like that, Yukina! Nothing happened with the princess last night at all!”

“…Ah?”

“Please pay no attention to her,” La Folia resumed, rudely fending off Sayaka’s efforts to steal back the phone. “Apparently, this anomaly affects people the greater their magical power. I want to investigate the cause of the phenomenon. It also makes rendezvousing with you and Kojou extremely likely to begin with.”

La Folia seemed to think a wise shrine maiden did not need any further explanation. She spoke commandingly, avoiding any unnecessary questions.

“Understood. Please be careful.”

“Yes, you, too.”

La Folia hung up with a smile on her face. Sayaka made a small “ooh” as she made a resentful glare from the side over the nonchalant look on the princess’s face.

“It seems I have support for my hypothesis.”

Brushing her silver hair from her cheek, La Folia stood up and picked up the underwear she’d stripped off the night before. She proceeded to elegantly put them on piece by piece.

Sayaka looked like she’d regained her senses.

“Yes. However, how do you intend to ‘investigate’ the cause of the phenomenon?”

This was why she was a War Dancer of the Lion King Agency; even when heavily agitated, she never seemed to let a single word slip by her.

“The timing of the phenomenon’s occurrence…how does it look to you, Sayaka?”

Sayaka looked out the window as she spoke.

“The Hollow Eve Festival…you mean?”

That day was the main event for Itogami Island’s enormous festival. Even from

inside a building, it seemed like the entire city was decked out for the occasion.

The greatest characteristic of the event was the arrival of a large amount of tourists from outside the island.

Those landing on Itogami Island underwent strict investigation; but while the Island Guard increased its on-duty personnel to compensate, there was no guarantee that they could completely prevent illegal entry.

“Are you implying this phenomenon was caused by a foreign intruder…?”

“Surely we should consider the possibility. If so, it means that someone deliberately created the phenomenon. It would be nice if we knew what benefit such a thing might bring, but…”

There didn’t seem to be any merit in casting an absurd spell to create irregular spatial distortions and random teleports of those with strong magical power. Also, surely there were more reliable methods for conducting indiscriminate terrorism.

But a spell to control space was far too grand to be used for a mere prank. It was difficult to believe that a person able to use dangerous, high-difficulty spells would use them for such a purpose.

No…

Even if the spatial distortions themselves were meaningless, was there some meaning in the result achieved by it…?

“Maybe the perpetrator’s goal isn’t to produce spatial anomalies at all…?” Sayaka murmured under her breath. The princess, in the middle of combing her hair, gasped as she put the brush down.

“I see. The spatial anomalies are merely a side effect. The original purpose is something entirely different, then. That is quite plausible. If that is so…”

The princess’s eyes fiercely glimmered as she reached to the holster she’d left on the side of the bed. Holstered within it was a golden, single-shot pistol. She checked it, confirming that it had a cartridge loaded that was made out of precious stones.

“Sayaka, contact the Gigafloat Management Corporation and the Knights of

the Second Coming on standby at the airport. I must resort to somewhat rough methods. The roots of this anomaly may run far deeper than we think.”

“P-princess? Just what is it that you’re planning to do…?”

Sayaka put her long hair in a proper ponytail and stood up as well. She couldn’t hide how La Folia’s uncharacteristic vigor struck her as a bad omen.

Looking back at Sayaka with amusement, La Folia smiled elegantly.

“It seems this will be a busy day indeed.”

4

The Akatsuki residence living room was eerily quiet. It looked exactly like Kojou had left it. There was no sign of Yuuma or Nagisa having returned. Of course, Kojou’s own body had not returned, either.

Yukina murmured as she looked all around the apartment interior.

“…There really isn’t anyone here.”

Right now, she was wearing an aquamarine apron dress, looking very much the part of the main character in a fairy tale. There was a large, identically colored ribbon on the top of her head. Apparently she meant this to be her Hollow Eve Festival costume.

However, her right hand was gripping the silver spear with a tip like a swept-wing fighter plane. This was a Schneewaltzer, the secret weapon of the Lion King Agency. The metallic spear was at its full length, breaking the fairy-tale ambiance.

“Yuuma’s things are gone, too.”

Kojou made a despondent sigh as he checked the guest room.

Yuuma’s luggage, her change of clothes, and the various souvenirs she’d bought while touring the island the day before had all been neatly whisked away. The only things left of hers in the apartment were a single miniskirted witch cosplay dress and her physical body.

Even so, Yukina searched the area for any trace of Yuuma.

Finally, she made a deep nod to herself, as if having had some sort of revelation.

“I have a broad grasp of the circumstances. I also have a strong suspicion as to the nature of the blue shadow you saw behind Yuuma.”

“Huh?”

For some reason, Kojou felt unease at the certainty in Yukina’s voice. His animal instincts told him that the rest was not something he should hear. If he did listen to her words, he felt like something precious in relation to his old friend would be shattered without a single trace remaining.

“Princess La Folia is probably thinking the same thing I am. No doubt she called earlier in an effort to confirm her thoughts.”

“…What do you mean?” Kojou spontaneously replied. La Folia didn’t know Yuuma. Surely she was not yet aware that Yuuma and Kojou had switched bodies.

Surely the only thing the princess had identified so far was that the spatial anomalies occurring on Itogami Island were related to magical power…

“Wait, you don’t think the Itogami Island spatial distortions are Yuuma’s work?”

“In one sense, I do. However, that cannot be Yuuma’s true objective.”

“…Objective…huh?”

Kojou stared at his own palms in silence. He’d been so hung up on the whole body switch thing that he hadn’t actually thought that far.

Regardless of who or what Yuuma really was, there was no way she’d swap bodies with another person for no reason. Of course she had a reason for it—reason enough to deceive Kojou.

Yukina suddenly changed the subject. “Incidentally, senpai…was it Nagisa who cooked this meal?”

Thrown for a loop, Kojou nodded.

“Yeah, probably. It’s the same thing Nagisa always makes.”

The meal on the dinner table was a huge omelet with fermented soybeans, fried seaweed, and a big helping of white rice. Kojou couldn't imagine another girl on the entire planet inventing an original recipe like *that*.

"If she prepared breakfast and left, that means it is unlikely that Yuuma dragged her along somewhere."

"Yeah…I think so, too."

Kojou nodded, a small portion of his tension relieved.

To Kojou, Nagisa running off was a problem every bit on the same scale as his own body being stolen. The existence of breakfast loomed large in his being able to avoid panicking. He figured she'd left of her own free will, unrelated to the Yuuma incident.

Besides, Kojou still didn't think Yuuma was capable of hurting Nagisa.

"What about Nagisa's cell phone?"

"No good. I tried several times." Kojou sighed as he looked at his cell phone's call history. "She couldn't have been thrown somewhere else like Kirasaka and the princess, could she?"

Yukina smiled reassuringly at Kojou.

"…No, if the princess's hypothesis is correct that only those of strong magical power are affected, the chances of Nagisa being influenced are low. Besides, no doubt Yuuma would not lay a hand upon Nagisa."

"…How can you be so sure?"

"Because Nagisa has nothing to do with her objective."

Kojou looked at her with a bit of surprise as Yukina replied instantly and without hesitation.

"Do you actually know what her objective is here, Himeragi?"

"Your body, senpai."

"…H-her objective's my bo… Eh?!"

For no good reason, Kojou covered his breasts with both arms. Of course, in this situation, the unexpectedly plump, bouncy feeling did not make him happy

whatsoever.

Could it be that Yuuma stole Kojou's body to use it for some kind of indecent conduct?

Or did she intend to engage in indecent conduct with Kojou now that he was a girl…?

Realizing the pale Kojou had misunderstood, Yukina furiously shook her head.

"N-not like that! What in the world are you imagining?!

"You truly are indecent," Yukina said with a reproachful glare, which of course made Kojou pout.

"Well, you're the one who said it!"

"I did not mean it like that, by your body, I meant the body of the Fourth Primogenitor!"

"…That's crazy," went Kojou, seriously sucking in his breath this time.

The last time he'd met Yuuma was four years prior. At the time, Kojou was an ordinary elementary schooler with no link to vampiric power whatsoever. Surely she had no idea Kojou had gained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

"How the hell does she know about…?!"

"There simply is no other possibility," Yukina replied with a serious look.

"It might be rude of me to say this, but can you think of any other reason a lovely person such as Yuuma would go out of her way to trade bodies with you, senpai?"

"…Hey, that really *is* rude."

Kojou felt like he'd been kicked in the gut, but he couldn't refute the correctness of Yukina's assertion.

Even at a casual glance, Yuuma's physical attributes far surpassed the norm. She had great looks, and her athletic ability was top-notch. He could see her getting dates from any age and either sex. In contrast, Kojou had nothing you could call worthy of special mention. Aside from having happened to physically become a vampire, he came off as a very mediocre male high school student.

Barring special circumstances, there was no reason Yuuma needed a man's body, let alone to pick Kojou's body in particular. Surely she had far better men to pick from than an old friend she hadn't seen in four years.

Kojou muttered as he suddenly realized that was gnawing at him.

"But is it really that easy to snatch a vampire primogenitor's body…?"

Vampires, in general, were called the strongest of all demonkind. Though there were many caveats, they neither aged, nor died of natural causes. Surely, most people would think that stealing the body meant stealing the power that came with it. But Kojou was unaware of the existence of any human being capable of obtaining a vampire's power.

Indeed, the result of trying to consume a higher being than oneself, such as a vampire, ought to be having one's own existence consumed instead.

Yukina was dead serious as she gave him a textbook answer.

"Magically speaking, taking over another person's body is not particularly difficult. All you need to do is put the other person's mind to sleep and mentally control them from a distance."

Even Kojou could follow that logic. This was controlling another person's body from a distant location… In other words, the type of curse known as "possession."

"Theoretically, switching souls—in other words, mutually possessing the other's physical body—is hardly impossible, I think. However, there are exceptions."

"…Exceptions?"

"Yes," said Yukina with a nod before saying something he didn't expect. "It is not possible for another human being to control a vampire's body like that."

"Why's that?" wondered Kojou aloud, full of doubt. Why were vampires such a special case?

"It is because vampires are created via a curse from the gods themselves."

Kojou's lips twisted as she bluntly stated the unpalatable fact: Vampires were beings cursed by the gods themselves. He'd heard the words many times over,

but having them said to his face still hurt to no small degree.

“No one exists who can use a spell that can overwrite a curse cast by a divine being. Such a spell would almost certainly be ineffective, and even if it were, the caster would likely suffer a backlash from the curse, bringing the vampire’s blood into himself. In other words, his ego would be consumed and he would become an empty shell.”

Kojou felt a sharp chill from the exceedingly simple and heartless analysis.

“Huh…?! Then how the heck did Yuuma steal my body?”

Yukina’s voice grew harder.

“I believe that she has not actually stolen your body, senpai. Yuuma is merely warping space. By swapping your five senses for hers through a spatial link, she can exchange what would normally be your own nerve pulses to your physical body with her own.”

Kojou murmured while touching his own cheek—or rather, Yuuma’s. “…In other words, you’re saying I’m hallucinating that I’m seeing what Yuuma’s eyes are seeing, and when I try to move my own limbs, I’m controlling hers instead…?”

Yukina silently nodded.

“As that does not involve direct interference with a vampire’s physical body, there will be no backlash from the curse. And so, she has achieved an effect superficially identical to swapping one another’s souls.”

It had been hard for Yukina to explain, but the more he thought about it, the logic was very simple.

If you can’t take over a vampire’s body magically, take it over using physical means—

Human beings couldn’t see their own souls. Even if you cracked your own skull open, there was no practical way to confirm whether you actually had one in you or not. Put another way, people had no self-awareness of whether they had souls in them or not. It wasn’t that Kojou’s mind was actually in Yuuma’s body. Even now, it was still in *his* body; he just didn’t have any perception of it.

“It’s like switching the wiring of a kitchen appliance, huh? But doesn’t that mean controlling space every waking moment she’s got control of my body? You can do that?”

“That is beyond human limits,” said Yukina with a shake of her head.

“Spatial control is top level magic. Even stabilizing a single ‘gate’ requires an enormous amount of magical energy and a ritual performed by a high-level practitioner. It is impossible for a normal human being to connect a countless number of nerves one by one between two people.”

“Isn’t…that some kind of paradox?”

If you couldn’t link nervous systems through spatial control, how had Yuuma taken Kojou’s physical body?

“I am saying it is not possible *for a normal human being*.”

Yukina looked just a little torn as she conveyed her words. Kojou, a resident of a Demon Sanctuary, instantly grasped the meaning of those words.

“So Yuuma’s…not a normal human being?”

Yukina’s reply made Kojou reel.

“Senpai…who do you know who is a master of spatial control?”

An image came into the back of his mind of a small female teacher who wore stifling gothic dresses on an Island of Everlasting Summer—someone who could control space with about the same apparent effort as most people spent breathing. She was called an ominous title by some—the Witch of the Void.

“You don’t mean, she’s…the same as Natsuki…?”

Yukina nodded gravely.

“A witch is a woman who makes a pact with a devil for power to grant an otherwise impossible wish, but the price she pays is her very soul…”

Kojou recalled the sight of the faceless blue knight that had risen from Yuuma’s back the night before. Was that creepy shadow truly what people called a devil?

Yukina decisively wove the words with her lips, gripping her silver spear

strongly all the while.

“Yuuma Tokoyogi is a witch…a witch of the same type as Ms. Minamiya.”

5

Motoki Yaze was on the high school building’s roof with a donut in one hand and a notebook PC spread before him. His face showed heavy signs of fatigue, which was natural—he hadn’t slept a single wink since the day before.

Spatial distortions had occurred continuously over the preceding twenty-four hours, covering virtually the entire city even at that moment, causing chaos in a variety of ways. Between using emergency health laws to address problems and shove word of them under the rug, researching the cause, making plans to deal with the hidden danger threatening the Demon Sanctuary, and to top it off, preparing for the opening of the Hollow Eve Festival, the Gigafloat Management Corporation was pretty much operating under wartime conditions.

Yaze the spy was doing his part, working on his own to try and find out who was pulling the strings behind the ruckus.

As Yaze was using his notebook screen to check for rumors on the Net, a 3-D hologram of a badly made stuffed bear cut right in.

“Huh. Looks like things are getting a little rough out there.”

This was the avatar of the supercomputers that controlled all of Itogami Island’s urban functions.

Yaze scratched his head as he shot a question to the overly chummy AI.

“It’s you, Mogwai? What happened to Asagi?”

Yaze didn’t like Mogwai. The sly artificial intelligence was too smart for everyone else’s own good; even though it was public property, it was a touchy, dangerous thing only Asagi had proved able to master.

Since Yaze was keeping his own spy activities secret from Asagi, he felt like the creature had blackmail material on him. He really didn’t like dealing with the thing.

“She just got to sleep. Even for the mistress, rewriting the Gigafloat network’s back end from scratch in one night was a miracle. Her face is so cute and defenseless when she’s asleep. Want a picture?”

“Don’t need it. Send it to Kojou’s cell phone.”

“Heh-heh-heh… Sounds like a plan. I’ll set it as his wallpaper while I’m at it.”

This thing really is something, thought Yaze as he clicked his tongue. For a machine, the AI seemed more human than the real thing.

“I don’t follow the tech talk much, but I gather the corporation’s systems have been stabilized for now?”

“We’ve pretty much isolated all the errors caused by spatial distortions. Our revised topographical scans are accurate to within a few millimeters now, and effects on commuters are down to long waits at traffic lights. That doesn’t help pedestrians who get lost, but all we can do ’bout that is bump up staff at lost and found centers.”

“That so,” Yaze said, exhaling. Apparently, Asagi’s having recreated the traffic control system overnight was the only reason it was operating sanely under insane conditions caused by random spatial distortions. It was typical of her peerless talent.

“Is the airport operating, too?”

“Yep. The agents you requested arrived, too.”

“I’d like to say I’m relieved to hear that, but we’re up against some tough competition this time.”

“The Meyer Sisters from LCO’s First Branch, Philosophy?”

“Yeah.” Yaze laughed ruefully as he looked over the data on the screen.

They were high-level sorceresses, even for a giant criminal organization composed only of witches. The organization was several thousand members strong. They possessed a large number of powerful grimoires, to the point that they were often referred to as the Library. The Meyer Sisters were known as militants even by LCO standards.

Yaze didn’t think agents from the mainland with little actual combat

experience would be of much help against them. No doubt the damage would be severe if it came down to a frontal engagement. It was foolish to try and drown powerful witches with numbers. The only good way to do it was to dispatch practitioners at or above the same level.

Mogwai lazily pointed out an inconvenient fact.

"It's strange, though. Large-scale techniques such as spatial distortions are said to be the methods of Seventh Branch, Arts, and Fifth Branch, Science."

Yaze murmured as if blowing him off. "If the Witch of Notalia is the goal of all this, they probably have an alliance or two going. The Black Bible she has is worth it."

"So the Gigafloat Management Corporation shares Li'l Miss Asagi's opinion, I take it? Meaning, the reason the witch sisters are causing spatial distortions all over the area is to…"

"Yeah. They're looking for *it*. Looks like it's still out of their hands at the moment."

Spatial distortions without rhyme or reason across the entire island—indirectly, that made the witches' objective crystal clear.

The spatial distortions themselves were beside the point. The witch sisters were using spatial distortions all over Itogami Island to search for something hidden within. At the pace the distortions were spreading, finding it would only be a matter of time.

"I see. So that's why Natsuki Minamiya can't move on this, heh-heh," said Mogwai with a gossipy tone.

Yaze scratched his face with an anguished look. "I don't like admitting it, but thanks to that we're short on manpower. Someone tough enough to take out the Ashdown Witches would be a vampire noble or a Lion King Agency Sword Shaman, but…"

Surely, Yukina Himeragi could face the witch sisters on even terms. Her spear, able to rend any barrier and neutralize demonic energy, was pretty much a witch's mortal enemy.

But if Yukina got involved, that meant involving Kojou in the incident, too. He had to avoid *that* at all costs. Bringing out a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor in an area with serious spatial instability was pouring a whole tanker full of oil on the fire.

The vampire aristocrat was out of the question. If that combat maniac realized what the witches were really after, he'd cheerfully lend them a hand. That was the worst outcome he could think of.

Mogwai spoke as if to make light of Yaze's difficulties. *"Incidentally, the Knights of the Second Coming bodyguard unit is requesting permission to land."*

"Escorts for the Aldegian princess, huh? More useful than agents from the mainland, I bet. Makes me jealous," Yaze said with a heavy sigh.

The knights of Aldegia, a country sharing a border with the Warlord's Empire, had a wealth of combat experience against demons. Plus, they had the pseudo–Holy Blades as their trump cards. Even if it wouldn't be an easy win, they'd still count as a serious factor against witches.

"The princess said she's happy to help settle the situation down. It comes with a condition, though."

"Condition?"

Mogwai sent the e-mail from Princess La Folia to the perplexed Yaze's notebook screen. The silly emoji in the text gave him a bit of a headache, but it was the content that made Yaze's eyes widen.

"…Is she sane?"

"She's an even wilder mare than the rumors say. Heh-heh. I like."

Mogwai smiled, as if pleased from the bottom of his heart. Maybe the fact it had been built to analyze complex problems accounted for how the AI seemed to find the troubles of others very funny.

In any sane situation, the contents of La Folia's plan were something to reject out of hand. If things went sour, it'd become an international incident between Japan and her nation. "But," said Yaze, rubbing his chin.

"Princess La Folia has a Shamanic War Dancer from the Lion King Agency

keeping an eye on her. If we pull this off right, we might settle this much easier than I expected. We should give it a shot.”

“Heh-heh…”

Yaze took out his cell phone as he listened to Mogwai’s laughing voice.

Yes. Against witches, you had to send witches or sorcerers of an equal or greater level. Fortunately, this was a Demon Sanctuary. Even Yaze had at least one person in mind who’d fit the bill—

6

There existed a type of book known as a grimoire.

In the past, these were used to record the processes for spells, magical rituals, recording experiments in controlling spiritual entities, and so forth. However, after accumulating vast knowledge to excess, books resulted that were imbued with powerful magic in their own right. Finally, they became able to grant power beyond the reader’s comprehension, and thus call forth great calamities—

These were grimoires: books of power.

Everyone engaged in the pursuit of magic wanted a grimoire for his or her own. However, precious few could actually control the enormous magical power stored within. Over the course of history, researchers beyond counting had lost control of their grimoires to be destroyed by them. In several cases, entire cities had been destroyed, contaminating tens of thousands of people’s souls. Many grimoires had thus been lost in the process.

Despairing at the situation, a number of sorcerers and witches established LCO—the organization known as the Library. They assembled grimoires from every corner of the earth, strictly classifying them according to their uses and sealing them away. Then, they lent the grimoires out, but only to the selected few.

They did this not for the development of magic, not to protect the peace of peoples the world over, but strictly to satisfy their own curiosity and avarice—

The Library was an exceptionally arbitrary and self-righteous organization of sorcerous researchers, well suited to being a criminal organization from the

moment of its inception.

LCO's Grimoire No. 539 was being unleashed at the top of Keystone Gate, the place at the very center of the Demon Sanctuary.

An enormous scarlet magic circle had been drawn on the rooftop of the huge building in the shape of an inverted pyramid. This was a ward set up to protect the grimoire.

The magic circle had been drawn using the blood of the Island Guard's guardsmen. The fresh blood from the wounds they had sustained while guarding Keystone Gate served as the foundation of the magical ritual.

The wounded guardsmen moaned in anguish before being discarded without a thought like broken crayons.

The oldest of the Meyer Sisters, Emma, stood in the center of the magic circle, dressed in black.

"Do you not think it is beautiful, Octavia? I feel I will be blessed with a life-changing encounter today."

She watched as the ancient text absorbed the vitality of the guardsmen sacrificed to it and released a powerful magical surge. The sisters had not killed the guardsmen so that they could serve as fuel for the grimoire.

The scarlet witch—Octavia Meyer—seemed scornful somehow as she gazed at the bloody magic circle.

"How marvelous, sister, reading fate from meaningless things just as the ancient Stoics did."

She did not partake in her older sister's hobby of looking at dead humans for amusement. Her interests laid more in the spectacular strewing about of brains and guts, splatter in the pursuit of slaughter.

"Ah, sister. Are these peons remaining atop the tower not an eyesore?"

The scarlet witch looked above her head, seemingly pleading to her older sister, *Is it all right if I kill them now?*

The witch was looking straight at a steel cell tower and a glass-enveloped viewing hall around it. Thanks to the sisters having taken over the rooftop, the

tourists were trapped inside the hall, unable to escape. All they could do in their hall-turned-prison was helplessly gaze dumbfounded down at the unfolding tragedy.

The black witch reproached her sister.

“Let them be, Octavia. Their fear and despair shall only make the moment we realize our goal more entertaining.”

The scarlet witch sighed in apparent disappointment as she replied, “…That is a splendid idea, sister. It is a wonderful test of Deism—there shall be no miracle from God here no matter how much they pray.”

It had been nearly half the day since they’d occupied the top of the building; it was only natural they were getting bored.

Emma murmured as she carefully flipped through the grimoire’s pages.

“It feels good to make space cry out.”

Though invisible to the eyes of normal human beings, the space all around Itogami Island had countless cracks running through it, making it resemble a spiderweb. The cracks slowly continued to grow, searching for something like the feelers of an ant.

The cracks chiefly affected those who possessed a high level of magical energy, but this was a simple side effect. Even if people were caught in spatial distortions and flung somewhere, or even if someone was pulled in from another point in time, these were minor trivialities. They barely counted as entertainment to stave off boredom when compared to the great chaos that approached.

Octavia murmured as a look of envy subconsciously came over her.

“Yes, truly. I must say, the power of the Blue Witch is great indeed—”

They’d been lent No. 539 from LCO—but it was not the sisters who were actually controlling it. The Meyer Sisters belonged to First Branch, Philosophy. It was a powerful faction dealing with causality and metaphysics, but it had little interest in spells affecting physics like those for spatial control.

However, the other witch LCO had dispatched was the actual reader for No. 539. She was the new girl, a specialist in spatial control spells granted the title of

Blue Witch.

Emma smiled as she spoke sourly.

“Naturally. She’s a witch made and born for this sole purpose, after all. Let us make fine use of her, at least until we find *it*.”

Yes—the girl was a disposable tool. She was merely a convenient puppet. A smile came over Octavia as well, like she was flattering her sister. But…

The next moment, the sisters’ smiles froze like ice. They noticed that cruel bloodlust had been trained upon them.

Their beautiful eyebrows rose as they turned their heads.

“Who’s there?!”

“How dare you sully my work of art with your filthy shoes—!”

Their previously relaxed demeanor was no longer anywhere to be found.

An intruder was walking right in, trampling on the ward they had made with a magic circle drawn with fresh blood. He possessed an extraordinary degree of magical power.

A cloud of miasma arose from the magic circle; a translucent tentacle sprouted out of the cloud.

It was the Monster of Ashdown they had used to wipe out the Island Guard unit the day before. It was the Meyer Sisters’ Guardian. It had automatically begun to intercept the alien presence it sensed entering past the ward. Countless tentacles rushed toward the intruder, smashing his body flat—

Or so they thought. That moment, he released an incredible blast that blew the Guardian’s tentacles away.

The witch sisters’ faces twisted in astonishment.

“Wha—?!”

As the ragged pieces of flesh that were once tentacles poured all around, the intruder gave them a frosty glare as he continued walking as if nothing had happened.

He wore a pure white, three-piece suit. He was a handsome blond, blue-eyed

man. Great fangs protruded from his boldly, charmingly smiling mouth.

“What a pity. I thought I’d let you go if you amused me a little more, but here you are, quietly holed up and buying time. My estimation of the Ashdown Witches has taken quite a hit.”

“Y-you’re…?!”

“D-Dimitrie Vattler…?!”

The witches spoke the man’s name with halting voices. The prestigious name of Dimitrie Vattler, Master of Serpents, an aristocrat of the Warlord’s Empire in Europe, was well-known among LCO operatives, and not only because he was an Old Guard vampire. A lover of conflict, he was a rare breed of combat maniac who would consume even his own vampiric brethren for the sake of his own pleasure. To the demons and witches who operated in Europe, his existence was synonymous with terror.

Encountering the Master of Serpents in a Demon Sanctuary at the ends of the Earth was the worst digression from the plan imaginable. Easily bored, he might have killed them on the spot out of sheer whim.

Vattler completely disregarded the existence of the witches as he gave the still-running grimoire a look. But No. 539 only held his interest for a brief moment.

“So that’s what’s causing spatial anomalies all across Itogami Island…”

Visibly deflated, Vattler murmured with a simple shrug of his shoulders.

“Quite some magical power, but you’re using it like a crystal ball, aren’t you? I suppose you’re searching for something precious sealed away inside the Demon Sanctuary. I expected more… What a pity.”

A wave of dense demonic energy gushed out of his right arm. The interference caused the grimoire to cease functioning.

Vattler did not do it out of any desire to save Itogami Island. He was merely swatting flies that were annoying him after having flown all that way for nothing. That was all it took for him to smash the Meyer Sisters’ plans there and then. The scarlet witch, quivering in fear until then from the overwhelming irrationality of it all, roared. Emma tried to restrain her sister.

“Octavia, stop, please!”

But the scarlet witch had activated her own grimoire the moment she shouted in rage. It was Grimoire No. 193, the abominable text that had brought about the so-called Ashdown Tragedy.

“Monad has no window, it is only a symbol—!”

A cloud of miasma gushed out of the magic circle in response to Octavia’s chant. The cloud changed into tentacles once more. However, the color of the tentacles was different from before. This was a repulsive spotted pattern mixing black with scarlet.

The Guardian’s tentacles were imbued with a special property while receiving magical energy from the grimoire. No. 193’s ability was “Expectant Harmony.” With it, no attack could harm the Guardian, nor could any defense fend off the Guardian’s tentacles.

Even Dimitrie Vattler had no way to destroy the mottled, now-invincible tentacles. Or so Octavia firmly believed when, a moment later, Vattler’s indifferent voice pierced the scarlet witch’s ear.

“Takshaka!”

The next instant, Octavia shuddered at the incredible shock wave the vampire aristocrat unleashed. It was an overwhelming torrent of magical energy that put the output of her grimoire to shame.

Finally, the torrent took the shape of a giant snake. This was one of the nine Beast Vassals that served Dimitrie Vattler. It was a beast summoned from another world possessing power equal to that of a natural disaster. The great, malevolent serpent, colored green and reaching tens of meters in length, unleashed a beam of light from its eyes, burning the mottled tentacles away.

It took but an instant. The witch sisters’ Guardian was annihilated; the magic circle drawn with fresh blood was also burned away. Vattler had overcome the ability of Grimoire No. 193 with brute force backed up by his vast demonic power.

Octavia frailly moaned as Emma supported her from behind.

“Wha…?”

She felt like she was watching a nightmare.

Among all familiars employed by humans engaged in the magical arts, witches’ Guardians were in a class of their own. Put another way, a Guardian was the avatar of a devil, able to fight an ordinary vampire’s Beast Vassals on more than even terms. It was said that support from a grimoire made one able to hold its ground against even an Old Guard vampire. Having seen such a Guardian smashed to pieces before their eyes, the witch sisters completely lost all will to fight. Vattler was simply that much of a monster.

“I wanted you to struggle a little more, but…ah well. Bye-bye!”

With a look of obvious disappointment coming over him, Vattler commanded his Beast Vassal to attack.

To the immortal vampire aristocrat, deadly combat was one of the few pleasures that let him truly feel alive. Vattler preferred that his opponents be powerful. That didn’t mean the mere presence of powerful magical energy; the important part was simple willpower. Vattler highly prized a strong will that would resort to any tactic and any strategy to defy destiny. That was what made the Fourth Primogenitor and the teenage girls around him so exquisite. The Lion King Agency shrine maidens and the princess of Aldegia—what means would they employ to come after Vattler when the time came for him to seriously go after Kojou Akatsuki’s life? Even just the thought of it thrilled him.

In contrast, these witch sisters had quickly lost their will to fight. Vattler saw no point in letting them live; besides, he wasn’t the type to grant a single shred of mercy to begin with. But—

Just before the witch sisters were to be swallowed whole, something deflected his Beast Vassal’s attack.

The corners of Vattler’s lips curled up in apparent delight as he murmured.

“Oh my.”

A teenage boy wearing a black suit had emerged out of thin air to shield the witch sisters. He was a high school student with a languid face.

Vattler kept his Beast Vassal on standby as he provocatively asked…

“You’re…not Kojou. Who are you?”

The teenager in the black suit had the same face as Kojou. The scent of the blood flowing through him was the same as Kojou’s. However, the air about him was plainly different. It was like someone else was in the driver’s seat.

And the technique he’d employed was spatial control—the same skill used by the Witch of the Void.

The youth in the black suit went down on his knees, bowing toward Vattler with deep respect.

“If you will excuse the intrusion, Duke of Ardeal, my name is Yuuma Tokoyogi, daughter of Aya Tokoyogi, ‘the Witch of Notalia.’”

“Really,” remarked Vattler, making a charming smile. “So you’re the daughter of LCO’s leader.”

The Witch of Notalia was the Great Librarian who governed the criminal organization LCO. She was on a completely different level than the Meyer Sisters, who were mere operatives of First Branch.

However, if he wasn’t mistaken, she’d been captured and remained imprisoned there on Itogami Island.

She’d been locked away behind the prison barrier inside the Demon Sanctuary.

“I have borrowed the body of the Fourth Primogenitor to aid me and my brethren in locating the prison ward hidden in the Demon Sanctuary to breach its seal and free my mother. I would ask you to overlook our efforts.”

Vattler dismissed his Beast Vassal upon hearing Yuuma’s words.

“So LCO is doing all this to release those locked away in the prison barrier?”

A welcoming smile came over him.

The prison barrier was set up to house fiendish demons and sorcerous criminals no normal prison could hope to contain. LCO’s goal was to rescue the Witch of Notalia, the Great Librarian, being held there.

But breaching the prison barrier surely meant simultaneously letting loose

other legendary criminals as well. It was virtually certain the Demon Sanctuary would become a battleground.

It was an ideal circumstance for Vattler, who craved fighting powerful opponents. Yuuma was simply asking Vattler to let it happen. Vattler also took a liking to the sheer insolence of her conduct.

Yuuma raised her pleasantly smiling face and took Grimoire No. 539, which had fallen to her feet, into her hands.

“With the vast magical power of the Fourth Primogenitor and my specialized skills as a witch, even the impregnable prison barrier shall fall. I trust that Your Excellency shall not be bored even if this proves not to be the case.”

The grimoire, having returned to the hands of its proper master, emitted a glow as the magical power of the Fourth Primogenitor poured into it.

Vattler smiled as he looked on, ferociously baring his fangs.

7

Around that time, Kojou and the others were at a café in a shopping district on the west side.

The time was just after midday. The district, full of a festive atmosphere, was brimming with stalls and food carts, with the streets jammed with costume-wearing tourists.

Up on a stage, a Mr. Pretty Girl contest with cross-dressing teenage boys was apparently being held, broadcast live on the side of a building that served as a giant LED screen. *Man, if I entered right now I’d win by a mile*, thought Kojou ruefully.

“This pumpkin pudding is quite tasty,” Yukina remarked.

“I had some of that earlier. The pumpkin pie here is pretty good, too,” Kanon replied. Yukina and Kanon, sitting at the same table, were divvying up the sweets served in a heap atop a large plate. If four people ordered, you had ninety minutes to have all the cake you could eat. Seeing both cosplay-wearing girls eat their sugary food with uncharacteristic vigor tempted him to smile.

“Would you like some more, Fourth Primogenitor?” Astarte asked Kojou.

“Yeah…thanks.”

Kojou made a melancholic sigh as Astarte went to get black tea from the drinks bar.

“I suggest we add more sweets. Three more orders are necessary before the cake buffet price ceases to exceed the cost of ordering separately at this store’s normal prices.”

“R-right. In that case, let’s get some chiffon cake and some scones… Hey!”

Kojou’s voice turned hoarse as he pounded the table out of the blue. Yukina and the others stopped eating in surprise and lifted their faces. Only Astarte continued drinking her black tea at her own pace, her expression unchanged.

“Why are we chilling out having a cake buffet in a place like this?! We still don’t have a clue what Yuuma stole my body for!”

“T-true. But the other stores were all full…,” Kanon pointed out.

“Supplemental. According to an investigation by the Saikai Academy newspaper club, thirty-seven out of forty-two respondents reported they were satisfied with this store’s cake buffet, a highly positive ranking.”

“Hey, I never said I was complaining about the taste of the food here…!”

Kojou, still inside Yuuma’s body, clutched his head and groaned. Yukina slid a new offering of cake before him.

“For the moment, please eat this and calm down.”

“Dahh!”

The desperate Kojou grabbed the cake and wolfed it down in one gulp.

Even that very moment, Yuuma was using Kojou's body to prepare for some kind of conspiracy. The increase in the frequency of spatial anomalies in the Itogami Island region was proof enough. They still had no idea where Nagisa was, nor did they have any word from Natsuki. It wasn't the sort of situation that fostered calmness.

Despite that, Yukina spoke in a composed tone of voice.

"Even if we went searching for Yuuma, we don't have any leads. Besides, if the spatial distortions grow even larger, hasty movements are far too dangerous."

"Ugh," went Kojou, at a loss for words. Yukina's logic was compelling.

Setting aside Astarte the homunculus, Yukina, a Sword Shaman, and Kanon, carrying the blood of the Aldegian royal family, were both powerful spirit mediums. Both were beings who attracted the spatial distortions. With the inside of Itogami City turned into a labyrinth, recklessly moving around was dangerous.

Indeed, Kanon had already caught Kojou in a spatial distortion leading to the bath at the Himeragi residence. There was no guarantee it wouldn't happen again. Of course, it was also possible Kojou's own magical power had been at fault there, but that wasn't the point.

"Besides…I already have a way to break Yuuma's spell, actually."

"Huh?"

Yukina's sudden confession left Kojou at a bit of a loss. *If you had a convenient way like that, why'd you keep quiet 'bout it till now*, he pondered…and then he saw it.

Yukina's gaze had shifted onto the silver spear standing beside her.

"Snowdrift Wolf, huh…?"

"Yes," Yukina said with a small nod.

Her spear could negate magical energy, indiscriminately annihilating any spell or ritual. No matter how powerful Yuuma's spatial control, so long as it was maintained via a spell, Yukina could no doubt wreck it with one blow. As a result, Kojou's and Yuuma's minds would return to their own physical bodies.

Apparently, Yukina had realized that and had opted for chilling out with all-you-can-eat cake instead.

“However, a forced end to such a high-intensity spatial control ritual would result in a proportionate backlash to the caster. Irrevocable nervous system damage could well be inflicted.”

Kojou looked back at Yukina with a shudder as her frightening words sunk in.

“Huh?”

One stab to Yuuma’s body from Snowdrift Wolf would stop Yuuma here and now. But that apparently meant frying Yuuma’s entire nervous system in the process.

Even if Yuuma was a witch, her body was still that of an ordinary girl. She didn’t have a vampire’s regenerative abilities like Kojou did. If she took that much damage, it was pretty much certain she’d die in the process. Even if she did survive, she probably wouldn’t wake up again, ever.

“W-well, of course we can’t do that!”

Yukina watched the indignant Kojou as she spoke.

“Yes. It is a method I wish to avoid if at all possible. If I cannot employ Snowdrift Wolf no matter what, the only option is to target your body with her still inside, senpai. After all, even if you die for a little while you will revive, so that would minimize the backlash to Yuuma’s body.”

“Hey, wait. Isn’t that predicated on my going through pain enough to kill a guy when I get back to my own body?!”

Kojou complained while putting his chin in his palms. He didn’t even want to imagine the pain of having his entire nervous system ripped apart, but it couldn’t be helped if they had no other options.

They were waiting for Yuuma to use Kojou’s body to create an incident.

When they noticed the incident, they’d rush to the scene. Then Yukina would stab Kojou’s body.

It was slipshod and unreliable as plans went, but it was equally true that they didn’t have any better ideas. Apparently, eating cake, waiting, and hoping was

the best they could do at the moment.

Yukina haltingly murmured, seemingly in an effort to comfort the sullen Kojou.

“Um, this is just my feeling, but I don’t think Yuuma will use your body in a destructive manner. After all, Yuuma trusts you, as shown by her leaving her body in your hands.”

Kojou made a small, pained smile at Yukina’s clumsy attempt to console him.

“…Suppose so.” *Her intuition probably ain’t wrong*, he thought.

Kojou didn’t know *why* Yuuma had stolen his body. Even so, surely Yuuma had no intention of hurting him. It was a baseless assumption, but even now, Kojou trusted Yuuma at least that much. She was, after all, his friend.

Kanon, silently listening to the conversation at that point, watched the side of Kojou’s face as she spoke.

“I don’t really know the circumstances, but I’d like you to return to your normal self…”

As if somewhat bashful, she lowered her eyes and added in a small voice…

“Yuuma is very good-looking, but to me, you are…you.”

“Kanase…”

A warm and mushy feeling rose in Kojou bit by bit, making him almost shed tears. Even if this body was his good friend’s, being separate from his own definitely made him nervous. But Kojou had people who were waiting for him to get back to his own body. That alone came as a great relief.

The little homunculus girl spoke, her face hidden under the pumpkin mask.

“I concur.”

“Astarte…?”

“Although it is objectively irrational, after undertaking a comparative analysis I have determined I subjectively desire that the Fourth Primogenitor return to his original body.”

“Th-that so…”

That *seemed* to mean that even though Yuuma's physical attributes were higher, Astarte *personally* wanted Kojou to go back to his old self. Kojou didn't feel all that complimented, but by Astarte's standards, this was her expressing goodwill with all the strength she could muster.

His mood having somehow improved, Kojou looked beside him toward Yukina. He was a little anxious over what she might think about that part.

Sensing Kojou's expectant gaze, Yukina became a bit flustered.

"Huh? Wh-what?! I am merely a watcher… I will fulfill my duty no matter what you look like, senpai…"

Kojou made a strained smile at Yukina's honor student reply.

"…Figured." He decided he ought to be quite grateful her behavior toward him hadn't changed along with his appearance.

Kanon suddenly looked at Kojou with a sharp gaze.

"Akatsuki…setting that aside…"

It was a rare stern look for her.

"You should not rest on your elbows during mealtime."

Kojou, still slovenly resting his chin on top of his palms, straightened his back in response to Kanon's scolding.

"Huh? Ah, er, right."

"And you should not spread your legs when you sit."

Thrown off by Kanon's unexpectedly strict guidance, Kojou did as he was told and corrected his posture.

"Th-that so. Sorry."

Kanon had been raised at an abbey when she was younger. No doubt that accounted for her strict upbringing.

Until now he'd never given the matter much thought, but Kanon and Yukina both had proper posture. *Girls have it tough, being judged by appearance so much*, thought Kojou as if it didn't concern him.

It was the next moment that he learned that his thoughts were still quite naive.

Astarte spoke up, producing a mirror and brush from under her coat as if by magic.

“Supplemental. I advise that hair maintenance and grooming is necessary.”

“Uhh?” At the same time, Yukina raised an “Ah!” and reached toward the side of Kojou’s face.

“You didn’t put sunblock on, did you? You mustn’t let such pretty skin go to waste!”

“Please use this. It’s my makeup pouch.”

“Eh, wait a… What are you guys doing…?!”

Astarte and Yukina firmly grabbed both Kojou’s arms and marched him off. They were heading for one of the shop’s washroom. Kojou fell into a panic when he realized the wallpaper was pink.

“Hold on! This is the ladies’ washroom?!”

“It cannot be helped. Do you intend to go into the men’s washroom looking like Yuuma?”

“Well, no, but… Ehh…?!”

The ladies’ washroom was packed full of female customers touching up their makeup after their meals. Seeing a row of pretty ladies busily putting on lipstick and mascara was, truth be told, not something he really wanted to see.

Furthermore, a bunch of them were trading info about the impressions they’d gotten from their dates like they were hammering out plans for a matchmaking party. The exceedingly frank ratings they dished out made even Kojou feel bad, and he had nothing to do with it. He felt like if he stayed in that place any longer, he’d never be able to recover.

“…Incidentally, what should I do if I have to go use the john in this body?”

Kojou muttered, suddenly concerned about the matter. *That’s actually a serious problem*, he thought. Of course, Kojou had no idea how girls went to the

toilet. At that point, Yukina shot Kojou a sharp glare. “You must not.”

“Y-you can say that all you want, but it’s biological necessity; I don’t have any say in…”

“You absolutely must not!”

“Huh…?!” Kojou was a bit despondent at Yukina’s unexpectedly emphatic declaration. Apparently, he had to get his own body back before *this* body developed the urge to pee. Apparently, Kojou’s time was running out…one way or another.

Perhaps it really wasn’t time to casually sit back and wait for Yuuma to kick up trouble. *If she’s gonna pull something, how ’bout sooner rather than later*, Kojou selfishly thought. Then…

As if granting his wish, a low impact shook the Gigafloat’s surface with a large *thump*. Even inside of Yuuma’s body, Kojou recognized it as a powerful surge of demonic energy.

“What’s this feeling?!”

Yukina was the first to react.

“It’s coming from Keystone Gate!”

Pulling her silver spear along, she rushed out of the store; Kojou hurried after her.

Everyone in the streets looked up at the sky in surprise, eyes wide.

The building at the center of Itogami Island was shaped like an inverted pyramid. On the roof of the building, the tallest on the island, something was wriggling. It was dozens of meters long, with mottled, creepy-looking tentacles.

“Himeragi! That’s…?!”

“Devilkin! A ‘Guardian’ for a witch!”

“Something like a familiar, then…! But that magic energy’s…?!”

The overwhelming sense of pressure he felt from Keystone Gate was not being given off by the Guardian.

In that place was a being with incredible demonic energy, even greater than

that of the giant familiar. In one sense, the ominous surge was one Kojou dearly missed…

“Yes, that surge is senpai’s… The Fourth Primogenitor’s demonic energy.”

“Yuuma, then!”

Having confirmed her whereabouts, Kojou started running.

Keystone Gate was the core of the Demon Sanctuary. It was also the very first place Yuuma had visited upon her arrival on the island. In hindsight, Kojou felt that Yuuma choosing it as the site for a magical ritual was quite natural.

But.

“…?!”

As if to keep Kojou from reaching his destination, people he’d never seen before blocked his path.

They were men wrapped in black robes as if they were Grim Reapers. He estimated they numbered around ten, minimum. Their faces bore no hostility; nor did they carry anything one could fairly call weapons. However, Kojou certainly felt that they were trying to keep him from approaching Keystone Gate.

“Senpai, please stand back!”

Yukina readied her spear and moved out in front. No doubt she thought that now, with people in disguise all over the city, even using Snowdrift Wolf where people could see wouldn’t stand out much.

“What’s with these guys…?!”

“I do not know. But I believe their likely purpose is to delay us.”

“Pals of Yuuma, then… Been watching us the whole time, huh?”

Kojou ground his teeth at his own obtuseness. If he’d thought about it clearly, he would’ve anticipated Yuuma would have had Kojou’s movements monitored. Of course, she’d be on guard for Kojou trying to take his body back, interfering with her own plan in the process.

“Astarte, take care of Kanase!”

“Accept.”

Kojou instructed the homunculus girl to protect Kanon as she stood there, defenseless. Astarte nodded and summoned her own Beast Vassal. Wings emerged from her back and transformed into a pair of giant arms.

For whatever reason, the people watching all around them raised an “Ohh!” of admiration. People broke into applause one after another.

“Looks like they think it’s an attraction for the festival!”

“Th-that is ideal to prevent a disturbance… But the crowd…!”

Yukina and Kojou looked at each other’s face, both at a loss.

At some point, the tourists on the street had opened up a roughly ten-meter radius gap; the black-robed group now surrounded Kojou and the others. Apparently they’d mistaken this for some kind of Hollow Eve Festival street performance. Well, with an openly villainous-looking group set to battle a group of beautiful costumed girls, they couldn’t exactly be faulted for thinking that.

But thanks to that, Kojou and the others no longer had anywhere to run.

If it was one-on-one combat, there was no doubt Yukina would clean up, but this time there were simply too many foes. Surrounded by this many people, Astarte couldn’t unleash the full might of her overpowered Beast Vassal, either. Having to cover Kanon and the current Kojou, neither capable of fighting, was simply too great a burden on the other girls. Furthermore, Yuuma would be completing her magical ritual during the time Kojou and the others were delayed.

Realizing they were completely hemmed in, Kojou clenched his teeth in anguish. The next moment…

“Wha…?!”

A “hoaaaaa,” like the shriek of a monstrous bird, echoed in parallel with a dull impact sound, blowing one of the black-robed men flying back with great force.

When Kojou and the others looked back in shock, they saw a young girl with her red hair in a double bun, long braid style, wearing a China dress. The girl unleashed another waist-level kick, causing another black-robed man to go down in agony. Saikai Academy’s middle school physical education teacher, Misaki

Sasasaki, asked in a casual tone…

“Hiya, kids. Finally caught up to ya. Are you all right?”

Yukina couldn’t hide her bewilderment that her own homeroom teacher had entered the fray.

“Ms. Sasasaki! What are you doing here…?!”

“Natsuki asked me to. She said to help you and the Akatsuki siblings out if she ever went missing. Looks like things got pretty bad while I wasn’t looking?”

Yukina nodded frankly.

“…Yes. Quite.”

Seeing Yukina’s forthright behavior made Misaki break out in a satisfied-looking leer.

“Roger that. Leave Kanase and the others to me and go.”

As she said this, the lady teacher adopted a strange pose. This was one of the so-called animal styles of kung fu, emulating the movements of a particular animal.

She was at once Natsuki Minamiya’s junior and a nationally accredited Attack Mage. She was a female martial artist able to take out gangs single-handedly, split the ground with her bare hand, and release *qi* wave beams from her palm among other things, giving rise to a number of urban legends.

“Ms. Sasasaki, these opponents are corpses. There must be a necromancer mixed in controlling them, but…”

“No problem! I’ll just smack them all down!” As soon as she said it, exactly as promised, Misaki began sending everything wearing a black robe flying. It was a display of amazing brute force, but she was strong in other ways. She beat away the occasional magical attack flying her way with one flash of her *qi*.

As gaps opened up in the black-robed human wall surrounding them, Kojou and Yukina slipped through the ring of tourists around them.

“Ms. Sasasaki, is Natsuki…?!”

“She’s all right. For now, at least.”

As Misaki answered Kojou's final question, she tossed in a wink for good measure.

After giving her a deep bow of his head, this time Kojou ran forward without looking back.

"Later, then… *Take good care of her* is what I'd like to have said."

Seeing the students go, Misaki made a small murmur to herself.

Then, she shot the black-robed men a look that burned with her fighting spirit.

The corpse soldiers, surely lacking their own wills, backed off, overpowered by her aura. A ferocious smile came over Misaki's lips, followed by another "Kishaa!" sound, as if from a monstrous bird. Sounds of admiration echoed among the tourists.

The festival had only just begun.

Chapter Four
Hidden Prison

CHAPTER FOUR

HIDDEN PRISON

1

The girl had been born in the dungeon of an old castle.

She opened her eyes to spell chants in place of lullabies. The ones watching over her birth were homunculus maidservants. In place of her mother's arms granting her warmth, there was only the cold chemical soup filling the glass vat.

She had no memory prior to the age of six. She had been granted the minimal knowledge required for everyday life and the pact with the devil. That formed all she could remember.

She was born with the body of a six-year-old, in a castle dungeon, alone.

…*Where is my mother?* she asked the homunculus maidservants.

"She is inside the prison barrier."

That was the maidservants' answer.

—Prison barrier? What's that?

"It is a prison in Tokyo Metropolis, Itogami City, the Demon Sanctuary of the Far East. It is a place of eternal exile in a different dimension sealed off from this world. The abominable Witch of the Void betrayed your mother and keeps her captive in the darkness."

The words of the maidservants came down upon the freshly born little girl like a curse.

"You were born to serve as Mistress Aya's trump card for escaping her confinement. You are a pure-blooded witch, having formed a pact with a devil at

birth. You are the Blue Witch, protected by the Blue Knight.”

The girl understood none of it. All she could grasp was that her mother was shut inside a place far, far away and that her mother needed her in order to escape from that place.

But the girl still had doubts.

If she was born for the sake of a prison escape, what would happen to her once that objective had been fulfilled? Would her own mother need her once no longer captive…?

“Your body is still young. Long years shall be necessary before you grow able to fully employ your demonic energy. Once you reach your sixteenth birthday, the season of darkness shall begin; on the day of the festival of bonfires, you shall go to the Demon Sanctuary and tear the prison barrier asunder.”

The maidservants did not allay her doubts. The only words they repeated over and over were to engrave upon her mind the details of the plan for rescuing her mother.

This, too, was surely a curse her mother had cast upon her. She had been born as a tool, one part of a complex plan for the great spell that would free her.

“There is no need for concern. We of the Library shall support you in every way. All is as your mother desires…”

Just as the maidservants had told her, her thirteenth birthday was the occasion for a great many sorcerers to visit the castle.

They granted her all kinds of knowledge: about the organization called LCO, about the Demon Sanctuary, how to decipher grimoires, how to control her Guardian, how to make use of her powers as a witch—

From birth, her affinity for witchcraft was well beyond the norm; finally, she obtained the title of Librarian from the organization. However, there was still no one who would answer her question.

—Did her existence have any value besides her role in the plan?

She posed her question to the Guardian who stood behind her back.

However, no answer came from the faceless knight. No answer ever came—

2

Kojou and Yukina escaped the throngs of people on the main thoroughfare and ran down a narrow alley.

It went without saying that Yukina in her apron dress, looking like a refugee from a fairy tale, and Kojou, currently stuck in Yuuma's body, made quite a sight together. Even in a city full of costumed tourists, the sight of them sprinting together without even a single glance to the side made them really stand out; everyone looked straight at them. But as they emerged from the alley and arrived at a plaza, an even stranger group awaited them.

These were riot cops bearing shields and armored cars built with gray-colored plating. It was an Island Guard barricade.

Kojou ground his back teeth as he looked up at the giant structure looming above them.

"Aw, shit…! They've sealed off this way, too!"

The roof of the inverted pyramid building that was Itogami Island's defining symbol had been taken over by a mass of creepy tentacles that looked like they came from a kraken. It was the monster Yukina had labeled a witch's Guardian.

The Island Guard's riot police were engaged in combat with that Guardian. Four combat helicopters were whirling above the building, firing machine guns and purification rockets in a merciless barrage.

Kojou was beside himself as he looked up at the spreading flames.

"Geez, they broke out the heavy artillery…!"

The onslaught had broken fragments from the building that poured down like hail falling from the sky. Ricochets and stray shots seemed to be spreading considerable damage to surrounding buildings. No doubt they'd sealed off the approaches to keep civilians from being harmed by such ferocious combat. But.

"We…can't get close like this, can we?" mused Yukina.

"Well, this is their job, if anything we should be praising 'em for reacting so quickly, but…"

Yukina and Kojou both murmured in impatient tones. Any way they thought about it, with the Island Guard doing a typically robust job sealing off the area, it was useless to try to break through to get to Keystone Gate. Even if Yukina was a Sword Shaman with all the proper credentials, they'd never let them enter a battlefield with combat choppers buzzing around.

Furthermore, the riot police began bombarding the roof of the building from the ground. It was a barrage of flak guns loaded with anti-demon explosive rounds. Along with the explosions themselves, Silver-Elysium alloy fléchettes with high-purification properties racked the monster's body. But there was no visible change in the monster's movements.

"…Not a scratch?!" said Kojou as he gaped.

Yukina analyzed the situation with a composed voice.

"That Guardian has probably been strengthened via magic… It may well be impervious to attack."

It'd take an amount of magical energy beyond all good sense to enchant a creature of that size, but perhaps it was possible for a witch with the favor of a devil to pull that off.

Having withstood the onslaught with ease, the monster began its counteroffensive.

It extended one of its mottled tentacles like a whip, wrapping it around one of the combat helicopters and snapping it in an instant. The out-of-control helicopter spewed flames as it fell toward the earth. It hit the ground hard, spewing out a huge amount of fumes from the explosion. The eerie shake of the Gigafloat's ground and the explosion's echoes between the tall buildings made it seem like they were watching a giant monster movie up close.

Kojou groaned ruefully as a burning smell wafted through the air.

"Ugh…"

The combat helicopter had been unmanned, but there'd been people wounded by the resulting explosion. If combat continued like this, it was only a matter of time before even civilians got wrapped up in it.

Furthermore, the demonic power emitted from the top of the building grew even greater in intensity. Even while Yukina and Kojou found themselves obstructed, Yuuma was getting closer to finishing her magical ritual.

Yukina bit her lip without a word. Her spear could easily rip apart the spell that was strengthening the Guardian's flesh. In spite of knowing this, the monster was on the roof of a building several hundred meters away, well beyond her reach.

Kojou took out his cell phone to search its map.

"Gotta be a way to slip past 'em…"

In a case like this, he didn't care if it was a tunnel or a Gigafloat maintenance shaft; if he could only find a way to get to Keystone Gate without getting stopped by the Island Guard—

But Kojou squinted with a feeling of tension as he looked at the photo used as his wallpaper image.

"The heck's this…?! …Is that Asagi?"

Displayed upon it was the innocently sleeping face of his classmate. She looked more baby faced without makeup, with a slight trace of drool on the corner of her lips, but that only made her cuter. He felt like he was watching a kitten happily basking in the sun.

Yukina icily glared at Kojou, while he stared at the wallpaper image in shock, and asked, "Senpai, where did you get that photo…?"

"N-no! It wasn't me! Someone uploaded this behind my b… Wait, ah?"

Kojou was desperately shaking his head when it suddenly clicked: An icon he'd never seen before had been added in the corner of the wallpaper image. The icon showed Keystone Gate; the text said, "Route Info."

"Himeragi, this way!"

"S-s-senpai…?"

Kojou took Yukina's hand and ran off in a completely unrelated direction. Yukina was still confused by the sudden action as she followed, almost like she was being dragged along. Kojou followed the directions on his navigation screen

and plunged into an unfamiliar building.

It wasn't that he trusted an application someone installed behind his back, but he didn't have any other leads for breaking through the stalemate. They were screwed anyway; why not give it a shot?

But the resulting phenomenon was far outside Kojou's expectations. He was assailed by dizziness, an eerie floating feeling, and a slight impact. When his vision stopped shaking, Yukina and Kojou were inside an unfamiliar shopping mall.

"A teleport—?! Senpai, what is this?"

Quickly grasping the situation, Yukina looked up at Kojou in shock. Kojou glared at his phone's screen and shook his head.

"This nav program says this is the route to get to Keystone Gate. Figure we'll come out inside the gate after a bunch of more jumps."

“So this uses reverse engineering of the spatial distortions? Who on earth…?”
“Maybe Asagi did this…?”

He didn’t know the how or why, but that Kojou could accept.

Technologically speaking, making use of the momentary instabilities caused by the spatial distortions to get to one’s destination by the shortest route was doable with the support of the network running throughout Itogami City. But it’d take a system administrator of a freakishly high level of skill to make that a reality. So far as Kojou knew, she was the only one who could produce a program like that in one night.

That said, Kojou didn’t think Asagi had sent that app to his cell phone herself… let alone with the picture of her sleeping face attached. In the first place, she shouldn’t have had any idea he was headed toward Keystone Gate to begin with. Someone was sitting above the stage pulling the strings. Maybe it was the Gigafloat Management Corporation, maybe the Lion King Agency… Someone was using Kojou and Yukina to overcome the impending situation.

But they didn’t have time to figure out whom.

“Anyway, gotta play the cards we’ve got. The next one’s a right turn at an intersection two hundred meters this way.”

“Yes.”

Yukina faithfully followed Kojou’s directions and ran off. As they rounded the bend, the floating feeling came at them once more. Spatial distortions had caused them both considerable grief since the day before, but by using them, they now had a way to get past the barricades to Keystone Gate. The instant they finished their fourth jump, a familiar steel tower leaped into Kojou and Yukina’s fields of vision. It was the tallest place on Itogami Island. It was a glass-encased viewing hall at the base of a cell tower; in other words, the roof of Keystone Gate.

Kojou yelled at the top of his lungs as he realized tentacles had surrounded them the instant they’d reached the roof.

“…That monster’s all the way here?!”

Now that he was seeing the mottled tentacles up close, they looked even more imposing than he'd imagined. The mucus-covered surface of its hide was eerily gnarled, with the pulsing veins visible, looking like a swarm of snakes.

The tentacles, their numbers seemingly without end, meshed together in a complex pattern and tried to crush Kojou and Yukina like bugs.

An intense silver flash sliced them apart.

"Snowdrift Wolf—!"

The silver spear Yukina thrust forward sliced through the tentacles, dozens of centimeters thick in diameter, as if they were paper.

The monster, which thirty-millimeter rounds from helicopter gunships and rockets equipped with demon-purging warheads had failed to even scratch, was being sliced to ribbons by the spear of a defenseless little girl, the pieces vanishing. This was the ability of the Lion King Agency's secret weapon, the "Schneewaltzer," in action.

"—Yuuma!"

As the wall from the witches' Guardian was broken, the sight of the ceremony being conducted within had become exposed. It was a magic circle drawn with fresh blood. Two witches stood to the right and left. And in the center of the circle stood a young man dressed in a formal, black suit. It was a tailcoat that just screamed *Vampire!* at you. It was the outfit that Nagisa had bought Kojou to serve as his costume.

"You're early, Kojou."

The young man turned his head and called Kojou's name. It was the mundane face of your everyday, average high schooler. The only thing you could call characteristic of him was how his forelocks looked light in the dark, like moonlight was shining on them—

There, standing before them, was the physical body of Kojou Akatsuki.

"You've always been like that. You show up at really important places with no clue at all about what's going on."

An agonized expression came over Kojou as he looked at his very own body.

“Yuuma…you’re…”

Yuuma was holding some kind of grimoire in her hand. And the enormous magical power trailing from her fingertips kept the grimoire active as it caused space to distort. That fact brought Kojou to despair.

Until it was staring him in the face, his heart had indeed held the faint hope that Yuuma was just a childhood friend and wasn’t mixed up in this incident, or that if she was, it was purely as a victim.

But it finally hit him. Yuuma really had hijacked Kojou’s body.

She was the ringleader of this circus.

A gentle smile came over Yuuma as if she was consoling the agonized Kojou.

“Don’t worry. I’ll hand this body back soon enough. Won’t you wait just a little longer? I’m going to find her very soon.”

“Find her…find who…?”

“My mother. I haven’t met her a single time since I was born, though.”

Kojou’s confusion grew heavier still.

“Your…mother…?”

He vaguely recalled that the young Yuuma had been living away from her mother.

If Yuuma was a witch, it wasn’t much of a stretch to assume that her mother was a witch, too. The chances of Yuuma’s mother being in the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island were pretty high.

That much Kojou could understand. But that was as far as his understanding reached.

Surely there was no reason to kick up a huge incident like this just to meet her mother.

Kojou stepped toward the magic circle, as if trying to force Yuuma to dispel his doubts. As if to stop him from doing so, he suddenly heard a laughing voice. He knew the sarcastic tone all too well.

“…That’s far enough, Kojou. Could you please not move any closer to her?”

In abject disbelief, Kojou shifted his gaze in the direction of the voice.

“?! What the hell are you doing here…?!”

There stood a blond, blue-eyed youthful aristocrat. Leaning back against the steel tower, he had an excessively eloquent smile on his face.

“Hiya. Kojou, you’ve become quite a bit cuter since the last time I saw you.” A shudder went through Kojou at Vattler’s tone of voice…and how it sounded like he was licking his chops.

It wasn’t that he was frightened with an Old Guard vampire standing before him. To Kojou, the youthful aristocrat was, in a sense, a more dangerous opponent than the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord, himself; after all, *this* was the man who’d offered Kojou his love even though Kojou was a man himself. He was too terrified to even think about what he looked like to Vattler now that he was stuck in Yuuma’s body.

Kojou therefore changed the subject with haste.

“Don’t tell me you’re in on this whole thing?!”

“No, no, I am merely biding my time, waiting for the ladies to open the prison barrier.”

Kojou was dumbfounded as he echoed the unexpected words that Vattler had spoken.

“Prison barrier…?!”

Even Kojou had heard the rumors about the prison barrier, a hidden prison within which dangerous sorcerous criminals were sealed away. It was a ghost prison. No one knew where it was or even if it really existed.

Maybe it was a place where the souls of executed criminals loitered, never able to reach the afterlife; maybe it was another name for a temple to an evil god that had sunk to the bottom of the sea. It was one of Itogami Island’s most enduring urban legends.

“So that wasn’t just some ghost story…?!”

“Not at all. The prison barrier is a man-made, otherworldly construct using the ley lines that flow under the Demon Sanctuary. Not even the directors who built

it know where it really is, but I assure you that it exists—somewhere here in Itogami City."

"I see, these spatial distortions… They're to find the location of the prison barrier…"

Yuuma was bending space all over Itogami City to find a place hidden in a bend in space. They were looking for the hidden prison barrier a lot like people used graphite dust to highlight the impressions left on a memo pad.

"Incidentally, opening the prison barrier's seal requires an excellent spatial control ritual and a huge amount of magical energy that surpasses the ley lines."

As Vattler finished explaining the magician's trick, Kojou shifted his gaze back to Yuuma, standing there without a word.

Now he felt he could understand the meaning behind her words.

Yuuma was a witch specializing in spatial control. However, no matter what favor a devil had granted her, she didn't have the magical power required to drown out the ley lines. The only one here who had *that* was a vampire progenitor spoken of in the same breath as one did a natural disaster—in other words, Kojou.

Having obtained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor in an irregular fashion, Kojou was an incomplete vampire. He was largely bereft of the special abilities that fellow demons possessed, and of the Beast Vassals dwelling within his body, he had only been able to tame three. However, Kojou's physical body certainly possessed a titanic amount of demonic energy.

To Kojou, it was worthless demonic energy he had no way to control, but Yuuma, well versed in magical spells, could. That was why she needed Kojou's body. "So that's…what this is…"

Yuuma said she was looking for her mother. That was *why* she was trying to breach the prison barrier's seal, because her mother, for whatever reason, was *inside* the prison barrier.

A pure-blooded witch born from a mother locked away as a sorcerous criminal… That was the truth behind Yuuma Tokoyogi.

But Kojou didn't think a mother forcing her daughter to bust her out of prison was the act of a sane human being. Besides, Yuuma's mother was unlikely to be the only criminal locked away in the prison barrier.

"It's going to be so much fun… All those sorcerous criminals locked away in an other-dimensional labyrinth. And they'll be unleashed upon the city all at once. Well, you can rest easy—I shall take full responsibility and recapture them."

As Vattler murmured in an all-too-pleased tone…

"Are you a *moron*—?! I can't rest easy about that!!"

Kojou's veins bulged as he yelled. Now he understood completely well why Vattler was casually watching Yuuma and her compatriots do their work: Vattler, a battle maniac through and through, was waiting for the criminals to be released, purely so that he could fight them.

Having apparently said all he'd wished to say, Vattler turned into a golden mist and vanished. Unlike Kojou, a complete vampire such as him was able to use such means to move when and where he wished.

But it was no longer any time or place to be dealing with that troublesome man. Yuuma needed Kojou's body to break the prison barrier open. Therefore, if Kojou took his own body back, that ought to be enough to stop her—

The next moment, as Kojou glared at Yuuma with that thought in mind…

"—Senpai, get down!" Yukina called out to Kojou in a sharp voice.

As Kojou gasped and looked up, his field of vision was buried in giant tentacles. The witches' Guardian had been commanded to wrap Kojou up and stop him in his tracks.

"—?!"

Yukina mowed down the assaulting tentacles with her spear. However, the tentacles did not stop moving. Replacement tentacles appeared one after another, tightening the pressure on Kojou and Yukina.

The witches standing to Yuuma's right and left were controlling the tentacles. Unlike Yuuma's warm demeanor, violence and havoc made their faces twist in delight. It was they who had brought down the Island Guard's combat

helicopters and inflicted grievous damage upon urban areas.

Yukina's brow trembled slightly as she realized what ritual they were employing.

"Black and scarlet witch sisters…! The ones from the Ashdown Tragedy…?!"

The witch sisters seemed quite pleased for some reason as they made haughty, high-pitched laughs.

"I see… So the one who can stand up to our Guardian is a dutiful, well-educated little girl," mused the black witch.

The scarlet witch agreed with her sibling as she stroked the grimoire in her hand. "—Some kind of shrine maiden, I suppose? What do you want to do, my sister?"

The black witch shrugged her shoulders in a large theatrical display.

"If I could, I'd bind their hands and feet, rip out their bellies, and use them as sacrifices for our ritual, but we cannot treat the body of the Blue Witch so… Let us deal with them in a polite manner until we find what we seek."

"What a pity. Such pretty girls, they would make such wonderful corpses—"

The Guardian attacked with greater ferocity as their grimoires emitted an ominous glow.

"Ugh?!"

"—Himeragi?!"

Unable to withstand the force of the advancing tentacles, Yukina retreated step by step. Yukina's spear was able to neutralize the Guardian's defensive ward, but it could not defend against the materialized monster's sheer mass. Somehow, her incredible spear skills repelled its attacks, but Yukina herself was a small middle school schoolgirl. She diverted and sliced apart the attacking tentacles one by one, but the intense effort required to do so was wearing down her physical endurance.

And all Kojou could do was stand there and watch.

If he'd been able to use the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, he could

have annihilated the tentacles, root and branch, but Kojou had no way to call them now that he'd been cut off from his physical body. With her knowledge of magical spells, Yuuma could use magic even though she'd been cut off from her own body.

However, Kojou's abilities were merely the consequence of having happened to become a vampire. Cut off from his own body, Kojou had no more power than the average person.

That fact meant Kojou couldn't even get close to Yuuma, let alone stop her.

All of the Island Guard's combat helicopters had already been beaten out of the sky; bombardments from the ground were unable to break the Guardian's defenses. The entrance to the roof had already been blocked off by the tentacles, so they could not hope for reinforcements from the ground.

Kojou weakly groaned as he looked all around the area.

"Shit…! What the hell can I do here…?"

There was nothing he could use as a weapon. Besides, he couldn't move out from behind Yukina's back to begin with. One wrong move, and he'd just get tied up by the tentacles and further add to Yukina's burden. All Kojou could do was despair at his own powerlessness.

As if to mock that powerlessness, a new tentacle appeared behind both of them. It shot up through the floor of the roof, circling to attack Yukina from her blind spot. Naturally, even Yukina had no way to fend it off.

When Kojou raised his face in shock, a girl from a far-off nation was standing there holding a golden gun, her long silver hair flapping in the wind. Then, a tall girl with long hair leaped forward, raising a long silver-colored sword up high.

"—Lustrous Scale!"

The silver-colored sword the girl swung down severed the innumerable tentacles without any hint of resistance. This was the first ability of the Lion King Agency's supreme weapon, Der Freischötz—an effect emulating the severing of space itself.

"La Folia!"

“—Sayaka?!”

Kojou and Yukina were more shocked than elated at the sudden and unexpected arrival of the cavalry.

The environs of Keystone Gate were still sealed off by the Island Guard, after all, and the corridors leading to the roof were shut tight by tentacles. There shouldn’t have been any way for them to get in.

Kojou asked the obvious question as he watched Sayaka and La Folia emerge with pinpoint precision.

“Where the heck did you two come from…?!”

Sayaka’s long ponytail swayed as she looked back, almost like she’d been waiting for him to ask.

“We’ve come to save you, Kojou Akatsuki. You really are high maintenance. When I’m not here, you always cause Yukina nothing but trou…”

Then, her face froze in bewilderment as she noticed Kojou’s appearance as he stood there. Surely it had never occurred to her that it would not be Kojou standing beside Yukina in this situation, but rather, a girl she’d never seen before. “Er… who are you?”

Kojou awkwardly scratched his face as he beheld Sayaka’s confusion. He belatedly recalled that Sayaka and La Folia still didn’t know Yuuma had swapped bodies with Kojou.

Yukina spoke while Kojou dithered about what kind of reply to make.

“Er… This is Akatsuki-senpai at the moment. Long story short, he has become a girl.”

It was a rather crude explanation, but the fine details weren’t going to change anything.

La Folia went “Oh my!” as her eyes widened in surprise.

Sayaka froze as if her mind was somewhere else; then, for some reason, she looked almost ready to cry as she yelled…

“What the hellllllll?!”

Oddly, it was largely the same cry that had come from Kojou's own mouth half a day before.

3

Island West—Thetis Mall. Motoki Yaze was standing on the roof of the shopping center's parking lot with his cell phone in hand, about two kilometers away from Keystone Gate.

He was conversing, not with a human, but with a synthesized voice with an eerily human tone.

A sullen expression came over Yaze at how the AI's tone conveyed clear amusement. *"Looks like it worked out, huh?"*

"Damn right it worked. We crossed a dangerous bridge to get here."

"Heh-heh… Kensei Kanase, huh? You sure get involved with a bad crowd."

Yaze turned his eyes toward Keystone Gate as he nodded in silence at Mogwai's words.

As Sayaka and La Folia emerged from teleportation, another person stood behind them: a man wearing a black suit like a priest's habit. Kensei Kanase—ex-royal sorcerous engineer of Aldegia. He had been the one to ferry Sayaka and the princess to the witch sisters.

Yaze spoke in a careless tone. "Witches don't hold the patent on spatial control magic. Any high-class sorcerer can teleport and move matter. Easy peasy for the sorcerous engineer of the Aldegian royal court."

The cause of the spatial anomalies shrouding Itogami Island was the magical ritual being conducted at Keystone Gate. So, destroy the ritual. Princess La Folia had been the one to suggest it.

An iron rule of conducting big-time magic rituals was to set up a powerful ward to stop interlopers from intruding. But the LCO witches hadn't set up a ward that could block spatial control magic. They'd taken advantage of that weakness and launched a surprise attack using teleportation.

She'd presented two conditions for making this happen.

The first was that Kensei Kanase, in detention for the Faux-Angel incident practically the other day, be released on bail. The princess, whose own powerful spiritual energy served only to ensure spatial distortions cut off her path, absolutely required a powerful sorcerer capable of using a teleportation spell.

The other condition was that the Island Guard request that the Aldegian Knights of the Second Coming join in the fighting in the city.

It was a condition that shouldn't have been legally permissible, but making it happen would turn the whole battle around. This was a Demon Sanctuary—if you wanted to make an omelet, you had to break a few eggs.

"And the Knights?"

"Already deployed. Their spiritual reactors are coming online now. They'll be active in about ninety seconds."

Yaze murmured in apparent satisfaction, but his face didn't show it.

"…That so. Looks like we've got all our cards ready to play."

A Sword Shaman and a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency were deployed, plus Princess La Folia, a Spirit Master in her own right. He wondered if the Meyer Sisters could match all that.

But they weren't the real threat. The problem was that the body of Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, was still in enemy hands. The one who'd stolen his body was the witch who was the ringleader for the entire incident.

Mogwai made an amused laugh as if mocking Yaze's anguish. *"Real shock that the Fourth Primogenitor guy turned into a chick, though. Who'da thunk it."*

"Asagi would faint if she found out. Bigger shock than finding out Kojou's a vamp." *I go through a lot of trouble for you guys*, thought Yaze as he sighed. Kojou really needed to get his own body back fast, for his sake and the sakes of his bumbling friends.

In reality, though, Yaze was just as surprised as anyone.

Yaze, the *real* watcher of Kojou Akatsuki, couldn't make use of his Soundscape because of the Hollow Eve Festival. On top of that, the LCO uproar had been

working him to the bone since the day before. Thanks to that, he'd been really slow on the uptake that something had happened to Kojou.

"Yuuma Tokoyogi, huh?" Yaze mused. "Amazing she just came right in using her real name. An old friend of Kojou Akatsuki, who just happened to get the power of the Fourth Primogenitor half a year ago, and blood descendant of LCO's Great Librarian… How's that for a coincidence?"

Aya Tokoyogi, the Witch of Notalia. She'd been locked away ten years prior with all public records erased, so Itogami City customs hadn't even run a check on her surname.

Furthermore, there was no record of Yuuma having been active in sorcerous crime herself. Of course, she wasn't on the Gigafloat Management Corporation's radar, but not even the Lion King Agency was wary of her. And so, Yuuma had landed on Itogami Island with all the proper formalities, able to casually go about preparing her ritual.

However, the idea of someone with no criminal record like Yuuma obtaining a leadership position in LCO was strange. Her history prior to meeting Kojou was unknown, but she hadn't been involved in any noteworthy incidents until the present one, nor did she have any motive to become a criminal.

That was it. Yuuma Tokoyogi was a blank. She'd been granted the abilities required to kick up this incident…and nothing more. It felt to him like she existed for the sole reason of preparing to bust Aya Tokoyogi out of prison.

Yaze looked at the surface of the sea north of Itogami Island as he spoke.

"I don't like the feel of it, but there's no time to look into it all. That's reaching its limits, too, by the looks of it."

The witches' magical ceremony was shrouding the entirety of Itogami Island in a shimmering spatial distortion. From time to time, you could faintly see something appearing like a mirage.

The contours of a building hidden in other-dimensional space was becoming visible, just as if they were using graphite dust to make the traces of earlier writing visible.

"The prison barrier, huh…? The game'll be up at this rate," mused the AI.

“…No choice, then. Gotta crush Yuuma Tokoyogi’s body flat.”

Nodding at Mogwai’s words, Yaze made an anguished murmur as if spitting the words out.

It certainly *looked* like Kojou Akatsuki and Yuuma Tokoyogi’s minds had been swapped, but this was only an illusion on the surface created by Yuuma’s magic spell.

If he destroyed Yuuma’s body, the source of the spell, Kojou would automatically return to his own body.

Yukina had similarly reasoned that she could use Snowdrift Wolf to do the same, but that was trickier. Compared to Yukina, who was worried about the aftereffects of the spell harming Yuuma’s body, Yaze planned to harm Yuuma’s body in bad faith, thus breaking the spell.

Of course, Yuuma would surely perish. But he had no other option for protecting the prison barrier.

“Long-range shot?”

“Nah. The sisters’ barrier will stop physical attacks like that. It’s time for my Aerodyne.”

Yaze took a small pill capsule out of his pocket. It was a drug that temporarily boosted his abilities as a Hyper-Adapter.

The ward the Meyer Sisters had deployed through use of the grimoire *Harmonious Expectations* blocked pretty much every kind of spell save spatial control magic. However, there were exceptions: light, gravity, and the air—these existed naturally in the world to begin with, so the casters, failing to see them as any threat, did not have their ward block them.

All that said, sniping lasers and sending in poison gas were likely to fail, for these were things out of harmony with the natural world. But Yaze’s ability was different.

Yaze was a Hyper-Adapter—a natural psychic who didn’t rely on magic. And by manipulating the flow of the air that already existed inside of the ward to create a sudden gust, he would blow Yuuma Tokoyogi all the way down to the ground.

That was the plan Yaze chose to resolve this.

“Sorry, Kojou. This is gonna hurt a little—” As Yaze murmured with convenient logic, “You’re used to dying by now anyway,” he tossed a pill into his mouth.

Consciously averting his eyes, less from the bitterness of the pill he tasted than the anguish Kojou would suffer from losing a friend, Yaze bit down and activated his ability—

“Oops…time’s run out,” Mogwai cut in.

“What?!”

The instant Mogwai reported, a vast, unanticipated amount of demonic energy erupted from Keystone Gate. The incredible gust of wind simultaneously sweeping over the area drowned out Yaze’s ability.

The border of the huge building, meant to be isolated in another world, was rent asunder, dragging it into normal space. This was the cause of the violent wind.

“Oh, that’s just great,” murmured Yaze. A small, rocky island had emerged beyond Itogami Island’s northern tip. A stonework cathedral stood at its zenith.

“The prison barrier…!”

Yaze moaned as he glared at the cathedral. His voice, pregnant with despair, vanished in the wild, violent wind.

4

Even now, just after the appearance of the prison barrier, Sayaka Kirasaka had been unable to recover from her shock.

“I-is it really Kojou Akatsuki…? Not that I really get all this?!”

Apparently she’d been just that shaken by the revelation that Kojou had turned into a girl. As she looked at Yukina, face down in deep vexation, she seemed practically in tears.

Something like this happened before, thought Kojou. Besides her propensity for jumping to conclusions, Sayaka seemed to be surprisingly fragile mentally,

something on full display here; it was probably because, as Yukina's senior, she constantly pushed herself to be calm beyond the bounds of reason.

Then, she pointed at Yuuma, who stood at the center of the magic circle.

"So what's the deal with the 'you' standing over there?!"

"Ahh… Er, how should I put this…?" Kojou stammered.

"That is a fake," La Folia declared, somehow very certain. "The real Kojou would not have such a gallant look on his face."

"Whoa!" Sayaka nodded with a serious expression, apparently sold. "You're so right, now that you mention it!"

"What's with the 'whoa'?" complained Kojou in an apparent sulk.

"Um, that body is technically mine, you know…"

The princess gave Kojou's current form a thorough examination, from the top of her head to the tips of her fingernails, her eyes finally resting on the hem of her miniskirt.

"I must say…this really will not do, Sayaka."

"No, it won't." Sayaka nodded gravely. Then, realizing what she'd let slip, she hastily shook her head. "Eh?! No, it's all the same to—!!"

"I cannot continue the royal line like this."

"Huh?! I-I'll have you know I think I heard something *really* off the wall just now?!"

"…"

I'll just leave them be for the moment, Kojou resolved in his heart, turning to face Yuuma once more.

Thanks to La Folia's and Sayaka's attacks, the witches' Guardian had been greatly diminished. Now, he should be able to get close to Yuuma and rip that grimoire right out of her hand.

But as if reading Kojou's thoughts, Yuuma looked at him and made a pleasant smile.

The next instant, demonic energy as thick as lava flowed from her, making the grimoire glow brightly.

Together with a rumble as if the air itself was creaking, a ferocious gust assaulted them.

The source of the gust was the surface of the sea at Itogami Island's northern tip. From there, Kojou suddenly noticed the outline of an island he'd never seen before.

It was a tiny island like the foot of a large, rocky mountain. The island was not even two hundred meters in diameter. Its height was in the eighty-meter range, but most of that was taken up by a cathedral wrought by human hands.

It greatly resembled an abbey in Europe known as St. Michael's Mount. Historically, that abbey had been later used as a fortress, and later still, a prison within which numerous clergymen and political prisoners were held.

Kojou only realized the man was there upon hearing his sullen voice from behind. "I see… So LCO's goal is to breach the prison barrier?"

"Kensei Kanase…?!"

The speaker was a middle-aged man dressed in a black suit that resembled a priest's habit. Kojou knew very well who he was.

Though this was unexpected, it was not surprising. Kensei Kanase, former royal sorcerous engineer of Aldegia, was an acquaintance of La Folia's. It took no special genius to guess that the princess had used him as her means to get to Keystone Gate.

"So that's the prison barrier…?" Kojou asked.

Kensei nodded. "Apparently they have made the border between this world and that one sway. At this point it is not fully materialized, but—"

"So the seal hasn't actually been broken yet?"

"Correct. It is as if we are looking at a ruin sunken to the bottom of the sea from the water's surface. Even if you can see it, pulling it up from the seafloor requires greater work by an order of magnitude."

Kensei's words made Kojou go pale.

Vattler had said that an enormous amount of magical energy was required to materialize the prison barrier.

But that was something Yuuma already had in the palm of her hand. She merely needed to know its location. If she knew what part of the sea it had sunk into, then— Kojou moaned, suddenly feeling like his right hand was on fire.

“Urk…?!”

Yukina turned around in apparent surprise.

“Senpai?!”

But when Kojou flexed Yuuma’s light-skinned hand, it was unharmed.

The wound was borne by Kojou’s physical body—in other words, by the young man standing in the center of the magic circle.

The grimoire in Yuuma’s hand was burning.

“Huhhh… Looks like this one’s hit its limits.”

Bathed in the enormous magical power of the Fourth Primogenitor, its capacity had finally been exceeded. No longer recognizable, it burned out and turned into ash.

“Aah,” the black and scarlet witch sisters vainly cried out.

“No. 539 is…!”

They were members of a criminal organization established for the purpose of accumulating grimoires. No doubt the witch sisters found the loss of a precious grimoire to be unbearably sad.

But Yuuma, a leader of that very same organization, tossed the burned grimoire away without a second thought.

“This grimoire has already served its purpose. Sorry, but I must be off.”

The scene before Yuuma’s eyes gently warped. Space bent, much like a ripple spreading across the water’s surface. She’d opened a teleportation gate.

“Wait—Blue Witch!” the black witch called out to Yuuma in haste. However, Yuuma didn’t even look back.

“You two stay here and hold them off.”

This said, she seemed to melt into the void and vanished.

Kojou stood where he was, powerless as he gazed at a point on the surface of the sea.

“Yuuma…!”

He couldn’t stop Yuuma from moving by teleportation, but he did know where she was headed. She was on her way to the prison ward so that she could completely breach the seal.

La Folia turned to the sorcerous engineer in black.

“Kensei, can you follow her?”

Kensei calmly shook his head.

“Unfortunately I cannot.”

Unlike a witch who could control space at a subconscious level, spatial control spells like Kensei employed required careful calculation of coordinates before a jump. The method simply wasn’t flexible enough to be used to follow someone.

“However, I can open a gate near the prison ward.”

“Understood. Do that, then.”

The silver-haired princess turned a pleasant, bewitching smile toward Kojou and Yukina.

“Kojou. Please take Yukina and go. We shall deal with the witches over there. But La Folia…”

Kojou hesitated to move, resisting the idea of abandoning them in the face of the enemy. However, the princess shook her head with a brave look.

“There is nothing Sayaka or I can do against a witch who has obtained the limitless demonic power of the Fourth Primogenitor. The only ones who can resist are Yukina with her spear that nullifies magic and Kojou—the true Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Got it. Saving our skins here.”

“—You have my thanks, La Folia.”

Kojou and Yukina spoke words of thanks and looked at Kensei.

The sorcerous engineer in the black outfit nodded without a word, sprinkling water from a small bottle he held in his hand. The pool of water that formed at his feet displayed a place unfamiliar to Kojou. Apparently that was where they were being sent.

When he looked closer, he saw that the area around the pool of water was rimmed with a densely packed, detailed, chalk-written spell. Apparently he couldn’t control space as if a natural ability like Yuuma or Natsuki could, but this was wondrous spell casting in its own right.

Biting his lip as if hardening his resolve, Kojou plunged into the scene displayed on the surface of the water.

“Ugh!”

Yukina immediately followed him.

Remaining behind, Kensei fell to his knees, his strength apparently exhausted. High-level spell casting such as teleportation surely imposed a suitably heavy burden, even upon an accomplished sorcerer as himself. At the very least, however, Kensei had fulfilled his duty. The rest was up to Kojou and Yukina.

“She said they will take care of us, my sister.”

“The girl certainly has a sense of humor worthy of a princess.”

The black and scarlet witch sisters, left behind on the roof, glared scornfully at La Folia and Sayaka as they spoke. They did not feel pressed, even after having witnessed the might of the princess’s spell gun and Sayaka’s sword with their own eyes.

“We should be honored she has gone out of her way to remain and become our ‘sacrifice.’”

“Then as befits her, the branches of our Guardian shall rip her innards asunder from hole to elegant hole, making her into such a lovely pile of flesh!”

The two witches unleashed their taunts, following with haughty laughter in unison.

“Why you,” said Sayaka, furling her eyebrows as she poised her sword.

She, an expert in curses and assassination, always addressed her enemies with respect. To a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, enemies were to be treated with the same respect one used when pacifying angry spirits.

To the fastidious Sayaka, the witch sisters’ scornful behavior toward the princess was unworthy of even the most minimal approval. But the princess made a composed, pleasant smile and stepped forward, as if to stop Sayaka from venting.

“If you laugh too much, elder ladies, the bags under your eyes shall become more prominent. Ah, the sags of your flesh as well, little by little.”

The air around them might as well have frozen and audibly cracked. The two witches’ expressions were raw with indignation at the young, beautiful princess’s casual words.

However, La Folia spoke as if not noticing whatsoever that the witches were shaking with anger.

“At the very least, the fact your pacts with devils did not grant you long lives without any aging represents negligence of the basics, or perhaps an exceptional lack of talent. I am somewhat hesitant to inform you, but those who are more advanced in their years look rather ridiculous piling on makeup to look young. Don’t they, Sayaka?”

Sayaka’s face twitched as the ball was suddenly tossed into her court.

“I-I suppose they do.”

For some reason, the princess’s gentle, goddess-like smile was eerily frightening. She actually felt sorry for the witch sisters.

A couple of witches from the sticks should *never* have tried taunting a cunning princess whose razor-sharp wit was honed by the mind games in a royal palace full of intrigue.

Knowing they could never defeat her with words, the witches threw their pride to the wind and howled.

“G-grr… You little bitch…!”

“D-do you know how much we’ve been through… I hate this! I’ll rip new holes into you!”

Sayaka was dumbstruck all over again at the witch sisters’ consternation.

“Th-that actually worked…?!”

Apparently La Folia’s words had wounded them deeply without her laying a single finger on them.

Raising her golden gun, the princess called out to Sayaka like nothing had happened. “Let’s go, Sayaka.”

“R-right…”

I’m not sure who the real witch is here anymore, Sayaka murmured on the inside as she raised up her blade.

5

Yuuma Tokoyogi stood atop a rusted bridge at the tip of the Gigafloat.

The prison barrier was several hundred meters away. The simple floating bridge connected Itogami Island to the small, rocky island upon which the cathedral rested. The prison barrier had still not fully materialized.

Yuuma looked at the surface of the sea from which the island jutted and gently extended her right hand.

The next moment, the space behind her wavered, from which emerged a blue knight phantasm clad in armor. Yuuma had named the faceless blue knight “Le Bleu.” The devil familiar was the witch’s Guardian.

The prison barrier was already right before her eyes. All that remained was to borrow the enormous magical power of the Fourth Primogenitor and drag it into her own world. Thus would the final seal be broken and her mission complete.

But before Yuuma could command her Guardian to do so, a voice called to her from behind. “Yuuma!”

As she looked back, she saw a very familiar body standing there—her own. In other words, Kojou Akatsuki, with whom Yuuma had switched bodies. The girl

with the silver spear was standing beside him, too.

Yuuma called out to them, honestly impressed.

“You’ve caught up to me already?”

Right now, Kojou was just a normal human being without any power whatsoever. There shouldn’t have been any way for him to pursue Yuuma after she’d relocated via a leap through space; at the very least, not through his power alone.

“You’ve made some good friends, Kojou.”

Kojou twisted his lips in anguish as he replied, “—Don’t say that like it’s got nothing to do with you. You’re one of ’em, you know?”

Yuuma blinked like she’d been slapped in the face and looked back at him.

“That makes me so happy. You still think of me as a friend?”

Kojou pointed beside him to Yukina as he spoke.

“I told you, I’m used to seeing witches already so I don’t think nothing of that. I’ve been getting to know one weirdo after another coming to the island, so you’re just one more.”

“That’s rude,” complained the girl holding the silver spear as she glared back at Kojou, eyes wide open.

It was natural she didn’t want to hear the World’s Mightiest Vampire complain about getting to know *weirdoes*. But she didn’t actually refute Kojou’s words, either. Kojou was dead serious as he asked Yuuma…

“Why are you helping people bust out of prison?”

Yuuma’s reply was brief.

“Because my mother made me for this.”

“…*Made* you?”

“My mother is Aya Tokoyogi—former head of the criminal organization LCO. She was captured on Itogami Island and has been locked away in the prison barrier since ten years ago. She had a tool prepared so she could escape from prison—me.”

Yuuma laughed at her own expense as she pointed at her own body, currently controlled by Kojou.

“I’m a test-tube baby made to grow at a rapid rate. I was born ten years ago, looking like I was six. It was just a little before you met me, Kojou. Mother programmed me to break Itogami Island’s prison barrier from the very beginning.”

Kojou’s expression grew grave as he pressed the point.

“Was it part of your mom’s plan to get to know me, too?”

Yuuma shook her head without hesitation.

“No, Kojou. That was the only choice that was mine. I told you, you’re all that I have. Besides meeting you, there’s not a thing in this world I can call *mine*.”

“That’s not…!”

Yuuma stopped his objection with a hand and turned her back on him.

“The plan changed a bit when LCO found out you’d gained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. Actually, we expected we’d be sacrificing the lives of a hundred thousand or so of Itogami Island’s residents to break the prison barrier’s seal. But thanks to you, that’s no longer necessary… Thank you, Kojou.”

Before Yuuma had even finished her words, Yukina lunged at her, spear glimmering.

“Snowdrift Wolf—!”

She moved at incredible speed worthy of the title of Sword Shaman. But before she arrived, Yuuma had already warped space to shift to a location dozens of meters removed. Having lost its target, Yukina’s spear sliced only air.

The faceless blue knight floating up from Yuuma’s back raised both arms aloft as its armor creaked.

A golden light emerged from the gap between the Guardian’s hands. It was dazzling electricity accompanied by a roar.

Kojou’s and Yukina’s faces froze over, no doubt realizing the light’s true nature.

It was an enormous mass of demonic energy taking physical form. A golden lion enveloped by lightning…

“Regulus Aurum…?!” Kojou shouted. Yukina was equally in shock.

“A Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal?! That’s not…?!”

Yuuma smiled under the strain of the uncontrollable surge of magical energy.

“I haven’t stolen his right to command the Beast Vassal. I’ve just warped time and space to call up a tiny piece of the past when Kojou used his Beast Vassal. All for the sake of this one brief moment—”

Even having taken over Kojou’s body and drawn out the magical energy held within his flesh, she could not call the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, for a vampire’s Beast Vassals were summoned beasts from another world with wills of their own. There was no way Yuuma, lacking authority over them, could control one.

However, by mixing the Fourth Primogenitor’s nigh-inexhaustible magical energy with her own power as a witch, she was able to control one through such irregular magical means. She was borrowing the memory buried within Kojou’s flesh when he’d used that Beast Vassal in the past, linking it to current space-time—

The result of her efforts was a rip through space through which flowed a cascading torrent of incandescence.

Even Yuuma’s spell and the Guardian’s blessing could not sustain such a ritual for more than a few hundredths of a second.

The power of the Beast Vassal that flowed through destroyed Yuuma’s ritual, severing the space-time link. The backward flow of magical energy burned Yuuma’s nerves as a destructive backlash assailed the Guardian.

Finally, the lightning vanished, leaving only Yuuma, who fell to her knees on the spot as smoke wafted up from her, and the damaged blue knight. The rusted bridge creaked, cracked, and was enveloped by blue-white flames.

“That’s a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor for you… Even Le Bleu couldn’t control it…but it looks like it wasn’t for nothing.”

Kojou and Yukina stayed where they stood, listening dumbfounded to Yuuma's frail murmurs.

The prison barrier was burning before their very eyes.

The island, unstable like a mirage until now, revealed itself completely, burned up, and fell to pieces. The materialization of the island and the connecting bridge kicked up waves and sea spray all around. The prison barrier's seal had been broken, returning it to normal time and space.

It was the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassal that had broken the seal. She had employed destructive power so violent that it could overwhelm any ritual to smash the powerful ward that shrouded the island. It was an act of brute force unworthy of the word *spellcraft*.

"The prison barrier's…turning solid…?"

Kojou moaned out as he looked up at the crumbling cathedral. The moment the final reverberations of the Beast Vassal's electrical attack vanished was the moment the spatial distortions had completely evaporated. Everything left was solid and real.

This was without question part of Itogami Island—a Gigafloat made to resemble an old, rocky mount.

He could see inside the cathedral from the gap left by a destroyed wall.

"But…it's…"

There was nothing but a cavity. The interior of the cathedral was completely hollow. It was literally just *empty space*. Yes, just a vacant space—

Yuuma approached the cathedral, even as pieces of the wounded blue knight scattered about.

"Looks like even if the ward's been lost, it doesn't mean the prison's been breached… This is definitely the place, though."

Kojou and Yukina were thrown off by how she seemed to be aware of the contents of the cathedral from the beginning. Yukina kept her spear up without fail as she gazed at Yuuma's defenseless back.

At that moment, Yuuma didn't have the physical strength left to use big spells.

Even so, she seemed at a loss as to whether she should attack.

Finally, Yuuma stopped where she stood. Kojou and Yukina drew in their breaths as they realized what she was looking at.

“This is nuts… What are you doing over there…?” Kojou murmured.

Inside, there was a chair.

A regular chair was placed in the perfectly hollow interior of the cathedral. The armrests were covered in extravagant velvet. There was a single woman sitting there, asleep with her eyes still closed.

She was beautiful and young, a witch with a visage like that of a doll.

Yuuma spoke politely and reverently to the still-asleep Natsuki Minamiya.

“The key of the prison barrier—it is an honor to finally meet you, Witch of the Void.”

Kojou and Yukina were able only to stare in amazement, completely at a loss for words.

6

Sayaka’s angry shout reverberated across the rooftop of Keystone Gate.

“Aw, geez! These things are really getting on my nerves—!”

Her field of vision was walled off by a mass of creepy, undulating tentacles.

Sayaka’s sword was able to sever the tentacles, protected by powerful magic, with ease. However, their numbers were simply too great.

With their power fueled by the nigh-inexhaustible magic circle, Sayaka and the princess could not get close to the witches that had summoned them.

La Folia, too, had a rare look of displeasure about her.

“Certainly, this is not getting us anywhere.”

Her spell gun wasn’t able to work at its full potential due to the defensive magic affecting the tentacles. Ordinarily, a single shot from her gun would penetrate a tank and gouge out a crater several meters deep behind it.

Yet at the moment, she was unable to even counterattack the tentacles that were assaulting them. Perhaps that had raised the princess's stress level, too.

La Folia murmured as if suddenly recalling something.

"They said, the branches of the Guardian…didn't they?"

It was a word that had come casually out of the Meyer Sisters' lips. They had called them the branches of their Guardian. Not tentacles, branches—

La Folia made a soft giggle and smiled in apparent pleasure.

"Then it is a plant, not a mollusk… I see. The incident the Meyer Sisters caused made a great forest vanish in its entirety overnight, yes?"

"The Ashdown Tragedy, you mean?" Sayaka recalled the incident of that name.

Over ten years prior, the Meyer Sisters had conducted a mysterious magical ritual on the outskirts of Ashdown, the capitol of the North Sea Empire in the northwest of Europe. This caused an anomalous phenomenon that wiped out some three hundred hectares of forest around the capitol. The city of Ashdown was ruined in the process and was abandoned shortly thereafter. This incident made the Meyer Sisters world-famous sorcerous criminals.

But there remained two questions in regards to the incident to that very day.

The first was: What kind of magical ritual were the black and scarlet witch sisters conducting on the outskirts of Ashdown?

And where did the forest that vanished go—?

"You don't mean… Then, this Guardian is really…," Sayaka murmured.

"Yes. If you imagine the lost forest down to the last tree taking the form of a devil familiar, that would explain this overwhelming mass. No doubt it is useless no matter how many you cut down."

Sayaka made a deeply frustrated groan. La Folia looked back at her and shrugged her shoulders.

Sayaka nodded, lowering her sword in the process.

"…I suppose so."

She knew it was useless to continue her attacks.

The witch sisters rejoiced as they beheld Sayaka and La Folia like that.

“Oh my. The little girls seem to be engaged in prattle, my sister.”

“Yes, truly. Perhaps they’re ready to beg for their lives? It won’t work,” said the witches, laughing with shrill voices.

The silver-haired princess shook her head, seemingly pitying the certainty of their victory.

“No, we were just remarking how your trick is less impressive than we thought.”

“Definitely. There’s plenty of ways to go about this now that we know what we’re dealing with.”

No doubt the casual rebuff of their fervent taunts was a decisive blow to their pride. The witch sisters unleashed ferocious bellows of rage.

Responding to their anger, the Guardian increased the ferocity of its attacks.

The elegant smile that had come over La Folia remained intact as she walked forward, raising the golden gun before her.

“I entrust this to you, Sayaka. I shall hold the line.”

Sayaka retreated, her sword still lowered.

“Right.”

They’d switched positions, with offensive duties left to the princess.

The princess did not falter as she watched the onrushing tentacles, reversing the grip on her pistol. Her gold-ornamented pistol came equipped with a silver-colored bayonet. La Folia poised it like a knife as she began to chant a hymn.

“—Daughters of the gods that reside within me, destroyers of shields, hail and storm, heralds of victory, those who carry the departed!” The eerie tentacles rushed toward the princess’s slender body. One would think she was being attacked by a giant mass of serpents. Certain of victory, the witches’ lips twisted into smiles.

Their smiling faces froze as a dazzling flash of light shone upon them.

“Wha—?!”

The source of the light was La Folia's bayonet. A fire that glimmered bluish white spewed forth, transforming into a giant sword. It was a sword of light with a blade that reached dozens of meters in length.

The blade pulverized the onrushing swarm of tentacles like so much stale bread.

"Ssister!"

"That light is the blessing of the spirits… That shouldn't be possible, but…!"

The witch sisters were falling into a panic as they watched their Guardian being mowed down without any resistance.

The beam the princess wielded was the Völundr System of the Aldegian royal knights. It was a tactical support system that infused a large mass of spiritual energy into a weapon, temporarily turning it into a holy sword class spiritual weapon.

It was equipment that normally required a large-scale spiritual reactor to provide the spiritual energy, but La Folia, a spirit medium, was able to summon spirits into her own body to produce the effect single-handedly.

The spiritual glow, lethal to demons, nullified the defensive magic of the grimoire and mowed down the swarm of tentacles. It was overwhelming destructiveness, akin to using a scythe to cut weeds.

And the new solemn prayer chant they heard came from Sayaka. "—I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee."

Sayaka's sword had transformed into a bow since the last time they'd checked. It was a modern-looking recurve bow. She notched an extendable metal arrow. It was called a Der Freischötz. It was a prototype transformable weapon, the pride of the Lion King Agency.

"Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath…!"

Sayaka unleashed her arrow right above her own head. The arrow, whistling in flight, released a sound like that of a wailing voice.

The whistling arrow unleashed by the magic bow Der Freischötz had an

auditory capacity far beyond that of human lungs, capable of chanting high-intensity curses. It was the curse, not the arrow, which was the real attack.

Sayaka had unleashed a malicious hex that would remove all spells cast upon the Guardian and envelop its main body in flames. The hex traveled through the roots of the Guardian, with lethal effect upon the entirety of Ashdown forest, over three hundred hectares strong.

It was not even several minutes until the purifying flames annihilated the Guardian of the Meyer Sisters. Aside from the vestiges of a burned-out magic circle, everything had bizarrely vanished.

“The forest… It’s gone… How can this…?”

“O-our…Ashdown Guardian is…” Knowing that they had lost, the witch sisters clutched their grimoires with religious zeal as they scrambled to flee. However, their faces were already twitching with despair.

Realizing that the tentacles had been annihilated, the Island Guard troops on standby in the corridor poured in like an avalanche. Without their Guardian, the witches had no way to flee off the top of a building over sixty meters tall. A hail of warning shots at their feet made the two witches collapse then and there.

The witch sisters were quaking and embracing each other when the guardsmen arrested them.

“Ssister…?!”

“It can’t be… Us, captured by peasants like these…”

Nose clips to obstruct spell casting; headgear to block telepathy; shackles attuned to the peculiarities of a witch’s flesh—those who upheld the law in a Demon Sanctuary had plenty of know-how where capturing witches was concerned and had been supplied with quality anti-witch gear. It was essentially impossible for people of the level of the Meyer Sisters to escape custody.

“…”

Even so, Sayaka stood at the princess’s side without letting down her guard.

Though it had landed her in combat against witches as a result, Sayaka’s proper mission was guarding La Folia. It was Sayaka’s duty to protect the

princess until she left Itogami Island.

The situation with the spatial anomalies enveloping the entirety of Itogami Island had already been altered. The grimoire used to distort space had been lost, and the possibility of danger befalling the princess had vanished. Yuuma Tokoyogi was still at large, but La Folia no longer had any reason to fight her.

Besides, La Folia was just as constrained by duty as she was. Her position as princess prevented her from moving as she wished. Even if she wanted to help Kojou and Yukina, circumstances simply did not allow her to do so.

As a result, Sayaka couldn't leave that place, either. Even though she knew Kojou, Yukina, and the prison barrier were in danger, there was nothing she could do. That fact caused deep internal distress inside Sayaka.

Suddenly, they heard a hearty man's voice from behind them.

"Your Highness, are you all right—?"

Men covered in bombastic armored combat suits descended from an Island Guard helicopter hovering close by. They were members of the Aldegian knights —La Folia's men.

"It is good that you are here. How goes the hunt?"

La Folia's question brought grateful-looking smiles from the knights. Through a covert agreement with the Island Guard, the Aldegian knights had been deployed within the city on special assignment.

"Four groups of LCO remnants destroyed, seven grimoires seized. They shall be good souveniers for His Highness."

The squad leader of the night looked quite proud as he reported the successful completion of their mission.

La Folia made a teasing smile as she nodded.

"Is that so. 'Twould seem enough to excuse my moving the knights on my own authority." The Aldegian knights would assist in the capture of LCO operatives that had landed on Itogami Island in exchange for the grimoires in their possession. That was the condition La Folia had set.

In so doing, the Island Guard had received aid in the field when it mattered

most, and the kingdom of Aldegia had obtained precious grimoires in turn. It was a win-win deal typical of La Folia, a seasoned negotiator.

“We have confirmed that Her Highness is safe as well. She is currently under the care of Misaki Sasasaki.”

“…Misaki Sasasaki? The so-called ‘Lady Wizard,’ a Wizard of the Four Fists?”

“That would appear to be the case.”

The squad leader nodded respectfully as La Folia raised her eyebrows in mild surprise.

Sayaka was very familiar with the title “Wizard of the Four Fists.”

It meant an expert in close combat who had mastered wizardry and martial arts to a very high level. One of them was employed by the Lion King Agency as a martial arts instructor. Even though it was during their apprenticeship, Yukina and Sayaka had challenged that monster simultaneously—and neither of them could lay a single finger on her.

A monster of equal standing was taking care of Kanon Kanase. Knowing this, an expression of relief came over La Folia. It was an honest expression with nothing hidden that was quite unlike her.

Then, the princess turned to Sayaka, who had pulled back just a little.

“I would have liked to watch the course of events a bit longer, but it seems I am out of time. I must depart this nation immediately.”

“Ah…yes.” For a moment, La Folia’s seemingly abrupt statement brought a dubious look over Sayaka, but she soon realized the princess’s true intent.

If the princess left Japan, Sayaka’s mission would be over. She would be able to move according to her own judgment. Surely she would be able to go aid Kojou and Yukina until the Lion King Agency assigned her a new mission.

An opaque expression came to La Folia’s face as she spoke.

“You have gone through quite a bit of trouble on my behalf. I shall ask the Lion King Agency to give you suitable rest and recreation time until your next assignment.”

It was a pleasant smile rich in meaning, conveying a secret shared by them alone.

“You have my thanks, princess.”

Sayaka made a fervent nod as she gripped the hilt of her long sword. Their role in the incident was not yet finished.

7

Kojou and the others headed inside the crumbling cathedral. Yuuma had teleported. Kojou and Yukina were hit by fierce dizziness and tossed onto a hard, dusty floor.

Yuuma didn’t know why she’d teleported not only herself, but Kojou and Yukina along with her. But she had some vague idea.

She figured she probably wanted someone to see the instant she had fulfilled her objective, the instant she fulfilled the purpose for which she was born into this world—

“Natsuki’s…the key to the prison barrier?” asked Kojou. *What’s that supposed to mean?*

Natsuki Minamiya continued to sleep in the chair in the cathedral’s great hall.

She was wearing a laced-up, frill-heavy dress. It was a sweltering outfit to be wearing on Itogami Island, where summer was year-round. But it suited the doll-like, still-sleeping girl to a truly frightening degree.

No doubt the shock wave from Yuuma’s having breached the prison barrier by force had been conveyed inside to Natsuki. There was a trickle of fresh blood flowing down one of Natsuki’s temples.

But Kojou still couldn’t understand at all what Natsuki, who’d disappeared on the day before the Hollow Eve Festival, was doing in a place like this to begin with. He wondered if the Natsuki sleeping here was really the Natsuki that Kojou knew.

“—Think about it. How do you send prisoners into a prison in other-

dimensional space even the Gigafloat Management Corporation can't locate for certain?" Yuuma gave the still-sleeping Natsuki a cold glare as she spoke. "Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void, is the jailer, gatekeeper, door, and key of the prison barrier. In the first place, Prison Barrier is the name of a spell to seal away vile sorcerous criminals—and she is the only one who can use it."

Kojou listened to Yuuma's explanation without a word. When she put it that way, the logic was simple enough.

Prison Barrier was a spell Natsuki maintained. That was why she was inside the cathedral. And that was why breaching the ward conveyed the shock wave directly to her body.

"Witch" was a title borne by women who'd formed a pact with a devil. They employed power identical to that devil's through the devil familiar Guardians. In so doing, they could retain human bodies while controlling magical power rivaling that of upper-rank demons, with spell-casting skill surpassing even the most accomplished of sorcerers.

But a pact with a devil came with a price.

The price Yuuma had paid was the installation of the "Dispel the Prison Barrier" program. She was born and raised to fulfill that command alone, having been granted spatial control power in exchange.

He wondered what price Natsuki had paid—

Was the prison barrier itself the answer?

Continuing to seal this giant, empty prison by her lonesome until the day she died—what if that was the curse imposed upon her when she made her pact with her devil?

Yuuma spoke as she looked around the dimly lit cathedral.

"This cathedral is Natsuki Minamiya's home. She's been living here the whole time. She hasn't been outside even once in the last ten years. She remains asleep here, all alone."

Kojou objected. "That can't be right. Natsuki's been working as our teacher at school all the time!"

Natsuki Minamiya was Saikai Academy's English teacher. She was also Kojou's homeroom teacher. She had a big mansion on prime land in Itogami City where she lived with Astarte and Kanon. What reason would she have to spend her nights in a bare, empty cathedral, sealed away in another world?

But Yuuma made a sad laugh as she shook her head.

"The Natsuki Minamiya you know is an illusion the real one created with a spell. She's just a dream of the pathetic girl you see here."

Yuuma's words made Kojou forget to breathe.

"An…illusion…?"

He couldn't object and say, *It isn't possible*. Surely it was a trifling matter for a witch of Natsuki's power to create a clone with substance that could act like a normal person.

Now there was a reason for her bizarre youthfulness—or rather, Natsuki not having physically aged since her youth.

More important, Kojou couldn't think of any explanation he could accept as to how the girl sleeping in the prison barrier, looking exactly like Natsuki, could be anyone else.

Yuuma walked toward the girl as she continued to sleep.

"It's meaningless to shatter one of her illusions. That is why LCO stayed its hand until now. That is, until her real body returned to our world so that the prison barrier could be released."

The blue knight floating up from her back raised a giant fist as if wielding a hammer. A single blow from the Guardian against the defenselessly sleeping little girl would end her life with the greatest of ease.

Yuuma seemed to be forcing her voice out from her throat.

"The criminals in the prison barrier are held captive inside her dream. If she is slain, the prisoners will be freed."

"—After you free them, what then?"

Kojou's abrupt question brought Yuuma to a halt.

“If you were born only to dispel the prison barrier, what’ll you do after you finish your duty? Do you think your mom’s gonna pat you on the head?”

“Kojou…”

“No she won’t… It’s just like you did with that grimoire that burnt up, she’ll toss you away like yesterday’s garbage, won’t she?! Is this really what you want, Yuuma?!”

Kojou blocked Yuuma’s path, shooting her a glare with the still-sleeping Natsuki behind him.

She seemed ready to break into tears as she smiled and shook her head. “I know that, Kojou. I know more than anyone the meaninglessness of what I’m doing.”

“Then—!”

“But I can’t fight the program that decided it! That’s my price for my pact with my devil!” Yuuma shouted in an anguished voice. For some reason, she looked like a little girl even while in Kojou’s body.

“The program’s all I have. If I accept that it’s meaningless—my being born into this world—everything about me is meaningless, too!”

“You’re wrong!”

Kojou put a foot in front of him. The force of it drove Yuuma back a step.

“You said it yourself. I’m here for you. I accept that your life has meaning. You don’t have to follow that stupid program!”

His powers as Fourth Primogenitor were stolen, his own flesh and blood were stolen, yet even so, Kojou’s declaration lacked any hesitance. For a single instant, Yuuma’s eyes made a look like a tearful smile.

“…It sounds like you’re proposing.”

“Huh?”

“You were always fine saying stuff like that since way back, Kojou. You really have no idea how much trouble that’s caused me… But thank you. I’m happy… Really, it’s…”

It's enough, Yuuma's lips mouthed. Kojou couldn't even yell for her to stop.

He couldn't, because by then Yuuma had already vanished. She'd leaped through space without any warning, emerging in Kojou's blind spot—behind the still-sleeping Natsuki.

Then, the blue knight, wounded all over, swung its steel fist down to crush her—

"Ugh?!"

It was a radiant silver-colored spear that squarely took the fist's blow. The girl wielding it, dressed in a blue dress straight out of a fairy tale, swung her spear over her head to impede the giant knight's arm.

"—Himeragi?!"

The blue knight was nearly twice as tall as the small-built Yukina. When accounting for the armor surrounding it, its mass must have been ten times hers. It wasn't an attack to be taken straight on.

But Yukina's spear easily breached the armor of the witch's Guardian and destroyed that fist.

Yuuma's expression hardened.

"I see… That spear is a Schneewaltzer…"

It was a purifying spear that nullified all magical power. It was the worst match possible for a witch's Guardian, which was magical energy taking physical form.

"The Lion King Agency dispatched me to watch over the Fourth Primogenitor."

With a *ting*, Yukina's spear audibly ripped through the air as she swung it around. The three-pronged tip of her spear turned straight toward Yuuma's heart. Her position had been eloquently conveyed: namely, now that Kojou's attempts to persuade Yuuma had failed, she would show no mercy.

"—I am taking back the body of Kojou Akatsuki!"

Yuuma laughed on the spot and instantly glanced at Kojou, who remained where he stood.

"You're too soft… With the power in that spear, if you attacked my real body

you'd settle this right away… Is it Kojou's influence stopping you? So you've been taken in by Kojou's silver tongue, too?"

Yukina seemed oddly sulky as she shot back. "That's not so! I-I've simply decided this is best under the present circumstances! Now that the spatial control ritual has been destroyed and there is a prospect of the Fourth Primogenitor's magical power running amok, I should prioritize recovery of his body, an exceedingly logical conclusion! Besides—"

"?!"

Before she finished speaking, Yukina kicked off from the cathedral's floor. As she moved with the force of a typhoon, her spear thrust forward, aimed precisely at Yuuma's chest.

"…there is no great difference in difficulty."

Yuuma's words were no bluff. At Yukina's speed, enough to rock a beast man back on his heels, there was no way Yuuma, lacking any close combat ability, could cope. "Le Bleu!"

Yuuma commanded her Guardian to protect her. However, Yukina's spear slashed through the blue knight's thick armor like it was thin air. Bluish-white sparks scattered about as the blue knight roared in agony.

Yuuma clicked her tongue and bent space. She was trying to use a teleport to get at Yukina's blind spot. But.

"It's no use!"

Yukina turned around like she knew from the start she'd do that, slashing toward Yuuma's destination point. It was her Sword Shaman ability to see the future. Simple surprise attacks wouldn't work on her when she was using her Spirit Sight ability in the middle of combat.

The blue knight's giant body staggered as fragments of its wrecked armor scattered about.

"So long as you control that body, your Guardian must employ most of its power to maintain the spatial link. It has very little combat capability remaining."

“You have a point… Beating a Lion King Agency Sword Shaman’s kinda tough under these circumstances.”

Yuuma readily acknowledged the tide was against her. A Sword Shaman could fight on even terms with a vampire primogenitor. They were anti-demon combat pros, not people a mere witch could take on without a plan.

“You’ve forgotten, though? I don’t have to fight you fair, you know—!”

Yuuma teleported just after she spoke. She’d leaped into the air where Yukina couldn’t follow, high above the floor of the cathedral.

“Oh n—?!”

Yukina’s face froze as she realized what Yuuma intended. The blue knight had activated an offensive spell. It was a beginner-level fireball spell, but when unleashed with a witch’s magical power, it had force on the level of a bomb. And Yuuma had selected as her target neither Yukina nor Natsuki, but rather, the stonework roof of the cathedral above the still-sleeping Natsuki’s head.

Even Snowdrift Wolf, able to nullify any magical energy, was powerless against falling rock. She had no way of protecting Natsuki against several tons of mass obeying the call of gravity.

But by the instant Yukina felt despair, Kojou was already sprinting over.

“Daaaa—!”

Kojou picked up Natsuki’s tiny body and rolled onto the floor. A moment later, falling stone crushed and pulverized the chair Natsuki had been sitting on.

Yukina’s eyes blinked in shock.

“Senpai—?!”

Kojou had anticipated Yuuma’s attack faster than she, a Sword Shaman, could peer into the future. That fact took her by surprise.

The answer to the question tugging at her came from Kojou’s own lips.

“Sorry, Yuuma. I haven’t forgotten the face you make when you’re going for a three-pointer.”

Kojou made a daring smile as he lifted up his dusty face. Kojou had never

forgotten his close childhood friend's specialty. He'd been watching out for Yuuma to make a long-range shot from the beginning.

Yuuma's face twisted in great anguish as she landed. "Kojou…! How can you still smile like that?! I deceived you! I'm a witch made to be a criminal from birth! I've been destroying the city you live in and hurting your friends—!"

Kojou stared back in amazement at the painful shout coming from his old friend.

"Yuuma…"

Suddenly, his field of vision was dyed scarlet. Fresh blood was flowing from his own forehead into his eyes.

"What the…heck is this…?!"

Kojou was in shock as he realized he was bleeding.

It wasn't a wound sustained during the roll. There was no pain. But Yuuma's beautiful skin was ripped in various places and was fiercely bleeding.

There was only one possibility he could think of. It was Yuuma's body crying out.

The forced link to take over Kojou's body, drawing out the magical power of the Fourth Primogenitor, calling a Beast Vassal, even for but a single moment, the wounds to her Guardian sustained in the fight with Yukina, one teleport after another—it was well beyond even a witch's limits. Yuuma's body had begun to fall apart, unable to endure the sheer output of magical energy.

"Yuuma!" Yukina's voice shook. "Please stop this. If you release any more magical energy, your body will—"

"It doesn't matter…!" The pain of the backlash was making her lips twist, but even so, Yuuma made a lurid smile. "Just a little more and my duty will be at an end. I'll finally…be free…"

Yukina silently bit her lip. Then, she let out a very deep sigh. Without a sound, the silver spear whirled around as her glossy hair flowed downward. Only a single way remained to save Yuuma—

That was to settle the bout as quickly as possible.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Yukina’s lips wove a solemn chant. She danced along with her silver spear like a warrior praying to the gods for victory—or a priestess granted an oracle that heralded the victory to come.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

The silver spear emitted a flash of light, the explosive spiritual energy flowing into it twice as much as before. That flash surrounded Yukina as she sprinted. Yuuma hadn’t seen what Yukina was doing. The blow from Snowdrift Wolf was aimed straight at Yuuma—and thrust through the heart of Kojou’s body.

Or it would have, had Yukina not stopped her attack. The tip of the silver spear did not reach Kojou’s chest. Yukina had hesitated in her attack in a span less than the blink of an eye.

Yuuma moved, not letting that tiny opening go to waste.

The blue knight’s giant fist swung toward Yukina’s flank. Yukina barely managed to receive the blow with her spear. But she could not stop inertia. Her small body was sent flying, sending her crashing down onto the floor several meters away.

“Himeragi!”

As Kojou rushed over, Yukina dismissed him and wobbled as she rose.

“…I’m all right… This is nothing…”

She reached out to the silver spear, picking it up, only for it to roll onto the floor once more. Her arms were numb from having squarely received the blue knight’s attack.

Yuuma spoke as she watched Yukina sit on her knees.

“You’re a kind girl.”

There was no mockery in her tone. Indeed, her tone was drenched in open envy.

“The Lion King Agency’s secret weapon, able to nullify any magical power…

there's no way to really tell if even an immortal vampire would come back from being impaled with a Schneewaltzer. That's why you stopped. You didn't want to kill Kojou's body—"

Yukina somehow got back to her feet by using her spear in place of a cane.

"…I do not know what you are referring to. That was just a little carelessness."

She was no longer in any condition to fight; at the very least, she couldn't hope for anything like her usual combat ability. She couldn't properly grip her weapon in any event. Yuuma spoke as if pitying the wounded Yukina.

"It'll end the same no matter how much you try it. You understand that yourself, don't you?"

If Yukina couldn't harm Kojou's body, she had no hope of victory no matter how many times she rose back up.

"Senpai…"

Kojou supported Yukina from behind when it seemed like she might fall over.

He put his hands on the silver spear so that both were gripping it together.

"Kojou…why…?" Yuuma asked, with her expression seeming to say, *Do you understand whose body you're aiming that spear at…?* The Schneewaltzer was a purifying spear able to slay even a rimogenitor. Kojou impaling himself with that spear was reckless, virtual suicide.

Kojou declared with an impetuous laugh…

"Sorry, Yuuma. I'm gonna send you packing and take my own body back. I mean, with this body, I can't go drinking Yukina's blood *like usual*."

Yukina's lips made a sour curl.

Wresting the spear from Yukina's hands, Kojou charged straight toward Yuuma.

"Let's go, Yuuma—from here on, this is my fight."

Snowdrift Wolf was heavier than he'd expected. However, it wasn't too heavy for him to wield. "Kojou—!" Yuuma shouted in anguish.

Then, she vanished. A teleport—!

But Kojou had anticipated that from the start.

Yuuma could not attack Kojou—or rather, her very own body.

If she caused harm to her own body, the spatial control spell would be broken and Kojou's consciousness would return to his own flesh and blood. For her part, Yuuma would return to her own wounded body, unable to do any more. If Kojou came at her with the intention of killing his own body, Yuuma really had no choice but to run.

And Kojou knew where she'd go.

Yuuma's objective was to take out Natsuki. With Kojou away from Natsuki's side, that was naturally where Yuuma would jump to—to the place she could kill Natsuki in her continued sleep.

So Kojou didn't wait.

Before Yuuma had even reappeared from her teleport, he threw the spear with everything he had.

When Yuuma returned from teleporting, she saw the silver spear flying through the air, aimed at her heart.

"Ugh…! Le Bleu—!"

Realizing she'd never evade it, she commanded her own Guardian to defend her. The heavily armored blue knight crossed its arms to block the spear. Without spiritual energy of his own, Kojou's throw did not imbue Snowdrift Wolf with its proper, magic-nullifying properties. It couldn't breach the Guardian's defense—!

"It didn't work?!"

Kojou slid into despair.

The next moment, a small girl wearing a blue dress cut into his peripheral vision.

Making an elegant smile, she spun around in midair and unleashed a ferocious spinning back kick into the butt of the spear, stuck in the blue knight's arms…

"—No, senpai. This victory is ours."

Before Yukina finished speaking, Snowdrift Wolf released a dazzling glow. She had employed a kicking foot to infuse the spear with spiritual energy rather than her numb hands.

Imbued with a Divine Oscillation Wave, the Lion King Agency's secret weapon ran through the blue knight's crossed arms, impaled it through its armored torso, and sank deep into the chest of *Kojou Akatsuki*.

Yuuma seemed beside herself.

"This is insane… Why, Kojou…?"

Her murmur vanished in a high-pitched shock wave that sounded like the shattering of glass.

The spatial control spell had been nullified; the recoil made the air itself shudder.

The blue knight's body seemed to melt into the air itself as it vanished.

All that remained was Kojou's body, slowly falling with his face up, almost like a marionette with its strings cut.

But what Kojou's back felt was not the hard sensation of the floor, but something soft and supple wrapping around him. Yukina had caught Kojou's body from behind just as he was about to hit the floor.

The scars of the deep spear wound remained in Kojou's chest. However, the blow had just missed the heart. It was not a fatal blow to a vampire possessing a high level of regenerative ability.

It was a grave wound nonetheless. Kojou Akatsuki made a frail moan as he pressed down on his bloody chest.

"Ow…"

Yukina let out a sigh of relief as she peered down at the look on the Fourth Primogenitor's face.

It was not a gallant face, nor a tragic one. It seemed a bit listless somehow, but it was the look of a common high schooler—it was the face he always wore, and one she knew very well.

Yukina put her hands over both his ears, as if to keep him from hearing, as she murmured gently to herself alone.

“Welcome back, senpai—”

Outro

OUTRO

It was Itogami Island—the coastal wall on the Gigafloat's northern tip. A man stood there, the dazzling rays of the sun pouring down on him.

He was a handsome, youthful, blond, blue-eyed aristocrat—Dimitrie Vattler.

At the end of his gaze was an old, crumbling cathedral. It was the last redoubt of the true guardian of the prison barrier.

All was laid bare to his vampiric super-sight. Namely, that Yuuma Tokoyogi, who had stolen the body of the Fourth Primogenitor, had been defeated by the combined efforts of Kojou Akatsuki and the Sword Shaman from the Lion King Agency.

And that *the prison barrier itself* remained in ordinary space, completely vulnerable and defenseless—

The corners of his lips turned up in a smile, Vattler murmured without a single shred of chagrin evident in his tone.

"So the daughter of Aya Tokoyogi goes no further. A pity."

He extended his index finger in a rhythm that seemed childish somehow.

"Nonetheless, now that the prison barrier has emerged, I could simply decide to destroy the final key with my very own hands—"

His narrowed blue eyes became dyed with a blood-like crimson. Bloody mist swirled up around his entire body, finally taking the form of a gigantic serpent.

This was one of the nine Beast Vassals that dwelled within the "blood" of Dimitrie Vattler. It was a sea serpent Beast Vassal with command over water pressure. It could instantaneously raise the pressure inside the cathedral to several thousand atmospheres, or alternatively, put it in a perfect vacuum state.

If he killed Natsuki Minamiya while she slept, the sorcerous criminals held

prisoner within her dream would be freed. Finally, Vattler would be able to test how his Beast Vassals would fare against those of the Fourth Primogenitor. It would be no bad thing to test if the Lion King Agency's Sword Shaman could overcome this crisis, either.

But before that— Vattler looked behind him.

"Shakala!"

Then, he mercilessly unleashed his own Beast Vassal.

The container yard of Island North was an industrial harbor and storage area for raw materials and other supplies brought in by freighter for corporate interests in the Demon Sanctuary. The harbor's operations were suspended for the opening of the Hollow Eve Festival, so no longshoremen remained. The only things in the yard were innumerable containers and empty space.

An unfamiliar silhouette stood on top of one pile of containers.

She was a small girl probably not halfway through her teens. However, Vattler was sensitive to the surge of demonic energy surrounding her. That was why he unleashed his Beast Vassal.

Vattler's Beast Vassal homed in on the object of his master's ire, changing its flesh to a super high pressure rush of water as it attacked her.

The attack from Vattler's Beast Vassal had an atmospheric pressure of one hundred thousand—enough to change carbon into diamond. However, the girl swept out a single hand; with her hand alone, she stopped an Old Guard vampire's Beast Vassal in its tracks.

The impact sent a waterspout-like squall raging all around, causing several containers to tumble down. Even so, the girl continued to look down at Vattler, her expression unchanged.

The girl spoke in a cold, crisp voice.

"That is far enough, Master of Serpents… It is not yet time to disturb their slumber…"

It was an awkward tone, as if one person was using another's mouth and tongue to speak.

The girl was wearing a black one-piece dress. It tightly squeezed her waist, distinctly showing off the lines of her young body. She wore a band on her head with animal ears poking up. She was wearing cat's paw boots over knee-high, black socks. Apparently it was a black cat costume of some sort. When he looked closely, he could see a tail, too.

However, behind the cute outfit, the girl's wide-open eyes conveyed no emotion at all. Only her lips smiled.

The corners of Vattler's lips curled up in amusement as he asked…

"Who are you?"

The girl made no reply. Her hair was fairly long, but perhaps because she wore it short most of the time, it was oddly disheveled. Vattler did not know that the girl was called by the name of Nagisa Akatsuki, nor did the girl herself announce such a name now.

"—So you have no intention of replying, I take it?"

New Beast Vassals appeared to Vattler's left and right. The Beast Vassals, now totaling three, spiraled together, transforming into a single Beast Vassal. It was a three-headed dragon with black scales. The dragon breathed in the surrounding air seemingly without limit, further increasing its mass. It loomed as large as a monster from myth and legend. Its appearance made one think it was a natural disaster, such as an atmospheric disturbance turned typhoon, made into physical flesh.

"Then I shall play with you in his place—!"

Vattler unleashed the monster upon the cat-eared girl.

It was far too massive a Beast Vassal to target a single person with. The aftershocks of the attack alone would be enough to inflict grievous damage upon Itogami Island's man-made surface plating. It went without saying that the girl at ground zero would be annihilated without any trace of her remaining. Vattler narrowed his eyes as he expected to see just that, when…

The next instant, his entire body endured an unforeseen shock that sent him flying.

“Guh…gaha…!”

Flying about ninety meters from his starting location until being smashed against a breakwater, Vattler coughed blood all about. Vattler’s attack, released very much toward the girl, had backlashed against him.

Every drop of blood in his body suddenly chafed and seethed under the pressure. The right side of his torso had been liquefied; not a single bone in his body had escaped damage. A normal human, demon, or a sane level of vampire would have surely died instantly. The fact he did not even lose consciousness was because he was a vampire aristocrat with the blood of a primogenitor flowing through his veins.

Its supply of demonic energy cut off, Vattler’s Beast Vassal had already dematerialized and vanished.

In its place appeared a new Beast Vassal, transparent like the ice of a glacier. It was a beautiful Beast Vassal not even ten meters long. The upper half of its body resembled a human woman; the lower half was in the form of a fish. Wings grew out of her back; sharp, wicked claws extended from her fingertips.

A mermaid or perhaps a siren—

With a frigid aura surrounding it, the Beast Vassal glared down at Vattler as if it was protecting the cat-eared girl.

It was this icy Beast Vassal that had annihilated Vattler’s Beast Vassal and inflicted such grave wounds upon him.

“This is insane… That’s Alessia Gracius… Avrora Florestina’s twelfth Beast Vassal. How are you employing its power?” Vattler’s body was still in tatters as he posed the question. However, the girl made no reply.

Vattler glared with poorly focused eyes at the girl; finally, his shoulders shook as he laughed out loud.

“No, I see… So that’s how it is… Ha-ha! That’s *why* you can use it—”

As he continued to laugh, clotting blood poured out of Vattler’s throat, even as seething bodily fluids poured out of wounds over his entire body. Even so, his laughter did not cease. It was laughter that was equal parts clarity and madness.

“So this is why Kojou Akatsuki consumed Avrora and gained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor…and you’ve been watching the whole time. Gwa-ha-ha-ha-ha…!”

The cat-eared girl on top of the container sounded somewhat beside herself as she spoke.

“…It seems your mood has improved somewhat, Master of Serpents.”

“Oh yes… Thanks to this I’m in a *very* good mood. I mean, it’s quite obvious. There’s only one possibility as to why there is someone other than the Fourth Primogenitor who can employ the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals…”

Having finally ceased his laughter, Vattler gently picked himself up.

The bones broken across his entire body had largely finished mending; his lost internal organs and the right side of his body had finished regenerating as well. Even if vampires were immortal by their very nature, it was a shocking level of healing.

The cat-eared girl spoke as she gazed at the revived vampire aristocrat.

“I have one thing to tell you, Dimitrie Vattler.”

“…And what would that be, *twelfth*?”

Vattler’s reply came with a defiant look. For but a single moment, the girl who looked like Nagisa Akatsuki raised an eyebrow in displeasure. She then continued in a calm tone of voice…

“Nothing is finished yet. Nothing—”

✝

Kojou Akatsuki opened his eyes in the dimly lit chapel.

He apparently hadn’t been unconscious for all that long. Kojou could still feel the pleasant coolness of the floor against his back.

But the white fabric touching his right cheek was slightly warm. Kojou had not yet realized that the fabric was part of Yukina’s dress as she cradled Kojou’s head on her lap.

Even so, Kojou subconsciously turned his face over to feel more of the pleasant

sensation when…

“Have you come to, senpai?”

Surprised to hear Yukina’s voice in his ear, he sat up in a great hurry.

“—Himeragi…?!”

The next moment, Kojou groaned in anguish from the intense pain racking his entire body. It was as if every nerve in his body had been tossed into a blender.

“Man, my body hurts like I just died…”

“…Just as we expected, then?”

Yukina petted Kojou on the head as if taking care of a high-maintenance younger brother.

Though embarrassed at how she was obviously treating him like a child, healing magic didn’t work on Kojou because he was a vampire; there was really nothing else that Yukina could do. He didn’t think any kind of sane treatment you’d get from going to a hospital could cure the aftereffects of being body-jacked by a witch, either. Going to one would be frightening just by itself.

Having retaken his own vampiric body, Kojou could think of only one thing that would help.

“Hey, ah, Himeragi…maybe some of your blood would…?”

“You may not. You absolutely may not. The other times, it couldn’t be helped because of pressing circumstances!” Yukina pressed her lips together with a “muu” and pinched Kojou’s cheek. This put Kojou at ease. It seemed she was letting Kojou know what she *really* thought.

Yukina had only offered him her blood twice so far. Both occurred after Kojou had already died. That’s why, when Yukina hesitated to use Snowdrift Wolf upon him, he’d told her to let him drink his blood *like usual*.

He was telling her: *It’s cool, even if I die from it I’ll come back.*

He wanted to think that Yukina’s finally using Snowdrift Wolf on him without mercy was just her following his good advice.

“I’m glad you realized. Thanks.”

“Please do not say that where others can hear ever again.”

Yukina pinched Kojou’s cheek again as she spoke. *So if no one’s around, it’s okay then?* pondered Kojou, though he had his doubts.

“Right… Yuuma?!”

Yukina’s gaze shifted to Yuuma, who was lying right beside Kojou on her side.

“She’s safe. The impact from having been severed from the connecting space was less than you suffered, but…”

Yuuma’s cheeks were still pale, and there were signs of having bled across her entire body, but she didn’t seem to be in any mortal danger. Her breasts were rising and falling as they should, after all; her face was not twisted in pain. Looking at her from the outside, Yuuma’s face was most definitely lovely. Behind that whole boyish attitude was a style that was surprisingly feminine and totally worked for her. Looking back on it now, he felt like he’d wasted an opportunity. Surely changing clothes and showering one time while in her body wouldn’t have been any great transgression?

As Kojou lazily thought of such impure things, Yuuma suddenly opened her eyes and looked at Kojou. It seemed like she’d been conscious to start with. To Kojou, rocked by the eerie timing, Yuuma murmured in a flat tone, “…Looks like I failed…”

There was neither anger nor sadness, only a hollow ring to her voice. She sounded like an old man who’d lost his reason to live who longed for death.

Seeing his childhood friend like that, Kojou felt a fierce anger and, heedless of how his entire nervous system creaked, he sat up and glared at Yuuma.

“No, that’s not it at all. You’ve been set free.”

Yuuma blinked several times over in surprise. Then, a smile came over her like a flower in bloom.

Kojou’s cheeks reddened as her smiling face took him by surprise. Apparently, in the last four years, that oh-so-handsome Yuuma had become able to display such a gentle expression.

“Kojou.”

“What?” Looking up at the obviously blushing Kojou, Yuuma teasingly asked…

“How did it feel to be inside my body?”

“Wha…?!” Kojou loudly cleared his throat by reflex. “Don’t say it like that, people are gonna get the completely wrong idea!”

“Did you do anything dirty?”

Kojou raised his voice as he felt backed into a corner.

“I did not!”

He knew full well he sounded like a liar in proportion to his desperation, but he couldn’t help it in a situation like this. The displeased look Yukina was shooting him from the side had him completely unnerved.

That moment, Kojou heard a familiar voice behind him.

“…Goodness, you certainly are taking it easy after kicking up this much of a ruckus.”

The ever-so-slight lisp to it mysteriously gave the sound of her voice an odd charisma.

Looking back, Kojou saw Natsuki Manamiya, whom he thought still asleep, standing there.

He was certain that this moment, this was no clone created by a magic spell, but rather her real body, sealed away in the prison barrier. But Kojou had the impudent and rather silly thought that she was exactly the same as usual. In the end, Natsuki was Natsuki, be she clone or original.

Yukina spoke in apparent relief. “So you have awakened, Ms. Minamiya?”

If she, the key to the prison barrier, had awakened, they could reestablish its seal or create a new defense system altogether, picking from numerous available options.

Kojou gazed up at Natsuki with a look rich in dissatisfaction. “Wait… don’t tell me you were pretending to be asleep. That’s dirty pool.”

She pouted at him a little.

“It’s true that I had to preserve my strength. Even I wouldn’t have gotten away

lightly if I'd taken a square hit from one of your Beast Vassals… You have some nerve raising a hand against your honored teacher. I must grant you a suitable reward."

As she spoke, she suddenly smacked Kojou's forehead right between the eyes.

"Owwwwww! What kind of reward is that?! And it wasn't me who did it anyway!"

"Mm? What, here? Is here good?"

"*Guoa?!* Shit… Well you sure seem well rested!!"

Kojou tearfully moaned as he clutched his forehead. He felt like the ceaseless, nigh-unbearable pain all over his body had eased a little. Perhaps Natsuki had used a spell to heal Kojou somehow. *If she did, couldn't she find a nicer way to do it*, Kojou sulked in his own head.

Finally, Natsuki looked down at Kojou in exasperation and sighed.

"Goodness…to have the day come when I'm saved by my own student. It's not easy getting old."

Kojou was beside himself at the words spoken by Natsuki, who bore the appearance of a little girl.

"I don't really think you're one to talk about that…" For her part, Natsuki's expression suddenly turned serious as she turned to face Yuuma.

"…What will you do, daughter of Aya Tokoyogi? Wanna go another round?"

Yuuma calmly sat up and shook her head.

"I'll pass. That knocked all the stuffing out of me. Looks like I don't have any reason to mess with the prison barrier anymore… Le Bleu is a total mess, too."

"Is that so?"

Natsuki looked at the Guardian Yuuma had materialized and nodded.

Thanks to the backlash of excess demonic energy and its battle with Yukina, the faceless blue knight was in a pitiable state with wounds over its entire body. Even if it could recover, Yuuma would require long months and years before completely regaining her powers as a witch. Kojou didn't think Yuuma really

wanted that anyway.

She was finally free of the curse her own mother had set upon her.

As it truly hit him, Kojou couldn't stop a satisfied smile from coming over his face.

And that was when it happened.

Yuuma's voice quivered with unease as she tried to release her Guardian from materialization.

"…Le Bleu…?"

The armor covering the faceless knight's entire body rattled and shuddered. The clash of metal on metal produced a strange sound. *It's laughing*, Kojou suddenly realized.

The knight, wounded all over, made a laugh under its mask that seemed hollow, like a skeleton—

"Le Bleu, stop!" Yuuma commanded it almost in a shrieking voice. But the blue knight's movements did not cease.

The blue knight reached to the sword on its hip, drawing it for the first time. The blade that emerged from within the scabbard was sharp and extremely polished, as if never before used.

Kojou and Yukina leaped, each moving in front of Natsuki to shield her.

However, the blue knight's next action went against all of their expectations.

After one wave of its giant sword, the blue knight plunged it into Yuuma's chest. Into Yuuma, the very person he was supposed to protect.

Kojou beheld the scene in horror.

"…Yuu—ma?!"

With a gurgle, fresh blood spilled out of Yuuma's mouth.

Yuuma reached out toward her own Guardian as she let out a despairing voice.

“…Mother… This is how…badly you want it…?”

The blade had thrust deeply into her chest. But the tip of the sword, which should have passed right through her, did not appear on the other side. It had used Yuuma’s body as a teleportation gate to transfer the sword somewhere else.

A broken, rusted voice came from the faceless blue knight.

“Long have I awaited this moment…the moment when even one as sly and capricious as you let down your guard.”

It was the voice of a woman, with the tone of an adult wicked witch.

Natsuki suddenly let out a scorn-filled murmur.

“A booby trap… To think you would use your own daughter as a decoy… Inhuman.”

When he scented blood wafting up with her breath, Kojou’s face froze over as he looked back.

A malevolent, raw mass of steel was protruding from the beautiful lace adorning Natsuki’s chest.

It was the tip of the blue knight’s giant sword—

“Ms. Minamiya!”

“Natsuki?!”

Yukina and Kojou could do nothing but gape at the all-too-twisted sight.

As Kojou lost himself to shock, Natsuki glared at him in mild anger and made a weak laugh.

“Fool… Don’t…call your homeroom teacher by her…given name…”

The small, doll-like body of his homeroom teacher slowly collapsed onto the floor.

He continued to hear the never-ending, ghoulish laughter of the faceless blue knight.

He picked up the all-too-light body of his homeroom teacher… Kojou could

only shout until his voice grew hoarse.

“Uooooooooooooo—!”

The roar of the Fourth Primogenitor echoed within the crumbling, dimly lit cathedral—

Afterword

And so, *Strike the Blood*, Volume 4 goes off to the presses.

With the fourth volume, this series has hit its second year. As the author, I feel like I've been sluggish every day like usual with no sense of growth whatsoever, but the product (and only the product) seems to be coming along fine, so please hang in there with me. It actually feels like the publication pace has increased. A little. Somehow.

Now, I feel like I have to come out right away and say I'm sorry, mainly for the treatment of Natsuki here. Actually, I intended to give Natsuki a crucial role back in the planning stage, but when it came to her actually getting her turn to lead… I mean, what in the world happened there?

Of course, I think everyone who has read until the final page can tell that it was really a simple matter of page count. Often, parts of the current episode are used to set up developments in future ones, so she'll be playing a much larger role in the next volume and beyond. I'm still very sorry for all the people who saw our plans in the mail magazine, etc., and who had their hopes built up for Natsuki to do more here. Incidentally, it was the editor who flatly turned down my suggestion that "It's okay to make Natsuki the cover girl for the fourth volume" so please direct any complaints to the editorial department.

This time, I received more criticism that Kojou was getting too many lucky scenes, so next time I'll put him through the wringer (by company standards)—it'll feel like it's physically impossible for him to even flirt.

Maybe this is a reason why people don't feel like enough happened, so just think of the next volume and after as being everyone's revenge.

Now, just as touched on even in the text of this book, Itogami Island's Hollow Eve Festival uses Halloween motifs. Maybe it's not quite the same of late, but

until I moved to a certain city a few years back, Halloween had a very fictional air to it; it didn't really feel like an event you actually experienced in real life. It's hard for single men to imagine any event existing in the entertainment world on the same level as Valentine's Day.

Now in spite of all that, this city really made a big deal about Halloween, with Halloween season bringing an army of cosplayers parading through and occupying the center of the city, with little boys and girls in costumes (for children's events) wandering around the shopping districts trick-or-treating every year like it was a normal thing, and it hit me: Whoa, this thing is *real*.

So, I've revived quite a bit of the impact of that moment with this, the Hollow Eve Festival arc, and that will continue. More to the point, next volume is the main event, so stay tuned.

So this ended up being last, but to Manyako, who decorated yet another volume with alluring illustrations, you truly have my thanks. Even though I hit you with overly clichéd requests like "How 'bout everyone in costume" and "Make it feel cute," you really outdid yourself and I'm truly grateful. Let me also thank Yuzawa the editor once more and everyone who was involved in getting this work into circulation.

Finally, my deepest thanks to all of you who have read this book.

I very much hope to see you for the next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 4

GAKUTO MIKUMO

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SUTORAIKU ZA BURADDO

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